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**Terra Cry:  
The First Birth**

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
***Master of Professional Writing***  
at  
**The University of Waikato**  
by  
**MELISSA SHIRLEY**



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

2020

# ABSTRACT

Five hundred years have passed. Earth is dead. Cetera is our new home. The ruling conglomerate G.R.A.Z.I.A. strips another planet of its resource. But Cetera isn't quite like Earth...

Beth will do anything to become Cetera's greatest scientist. Her baby doesn't have a name yet, but the world has seen it inside her womb. Every other human on the planet is cursed with infertility. The people and their clone children are desperate to know her secret.

Faye knows herself as a number, a prisoner, and as 'the weapon'. Every day she senses the vibrations of people's bodies, deep within their cells, the slight changes in their temperature, the movement of their blood. She is dumped into a trash compactor and offered a glimpse of freedom, but the planet is in turmoil.

Fenrir only read about his half-wolf father's battles, but he will lead his army just the same. The humans claim that his people, the Kwewu, are the cause of humanity's infertility. This is a declaration of war and he has no intention of losing.

Lilly has lived in a mansion all her life, with everything her heart desired and all the love and warmth a child deserves, but her father, the vice-president, becomes reviled by the wolf-people, and her brother idolises their true enemy, Lord Kabel.

Skar has lived in the slums of the Floating City all his life but now he is the city's enemy; a Kwewu on the streets, breaking curfew. A human with wolf ears, a wolf nose, and wolf fur. He and his younger brother are slaves now. Body's to torture. Mind's to break.

Ellbray is a Kwewu warrior with revenge hot on her mind. Someone killed the last president and his son, and she wants to know who. She'll pretend to be President Roth's protector to find out. Even when his fleshy throat is exposed to her sharp canines, she'll hold back her hatred to find the source of her pain.

Whether they're Kwewu, android, or human, the inhabitants of Cetera will find their answers through pain, suffering and great regret.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a story about a story that sat untouched in my Google Drive for nearly four years. First, Tracey Slaughter came along to teach me Voice and Image. A spectacular lecturer, unforgettable, the best I've ever had. This is when I realised the Google Drive needed my attention. With a new eye for concrete imagery, I took to my story with a sledgehammer. My supervisor Catherine Chidgey helped me cannibalise the parts of this novel suited to my thesis. She is a true gem that this university should always hold onto and I take great pride in having her mentor me through this process.

Next my classmates came along, happy to point out my far too literal details which led to misplaced floating limbs, hybrid animal-human creatures that weren't meant to be, or talking severed heads.

My close friend and flatmate Erin McGregor suffered through the thousands of sticky notes scattered on our yellow walls. Our wild and abstract discussions ultimately gave me the epiphany which wrote my final chapter.

One of my oldest friends, Sara Gulliver, took time to read my book as my target audience. She spent months analysing it and illuminating the confusing or unclear parts of the narrative. She was there with me in the final weeks as I dragged my thesis to its inevitable end.

The final draft was punctuated by one of my closest friends and editor, Yasmin Wilkinson, who took time out of her hectic science PhD to read my most unscientific sci-fi thesis. I can't thank her enough for the support she's given me, not only as an editor and reader, but as a friend. Through every high and low, Yasmin has been there for me and I wouldn't be where I am without her.

Of course, the story would be incomplete without mentioning my family. My mum (Carol Shirley), my dad (Stephen Shirley), my brother (Scott Shirley), my sister-in-law (Amber Rowley), and my lovely niece and nephew (Emma and Oli Shirley) all got me through life in various ways. Whether it be emotional support, financial support, or encouragement. They gave me the confidence to write this thesis and pursue my dreams. We lost our beloved Nana Thomasina Innes (nee Whiteford) during the writing of this thesis, so I want to dedicate this to her memory.



Aye be in oor hairts



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## CHARACTER BIOS

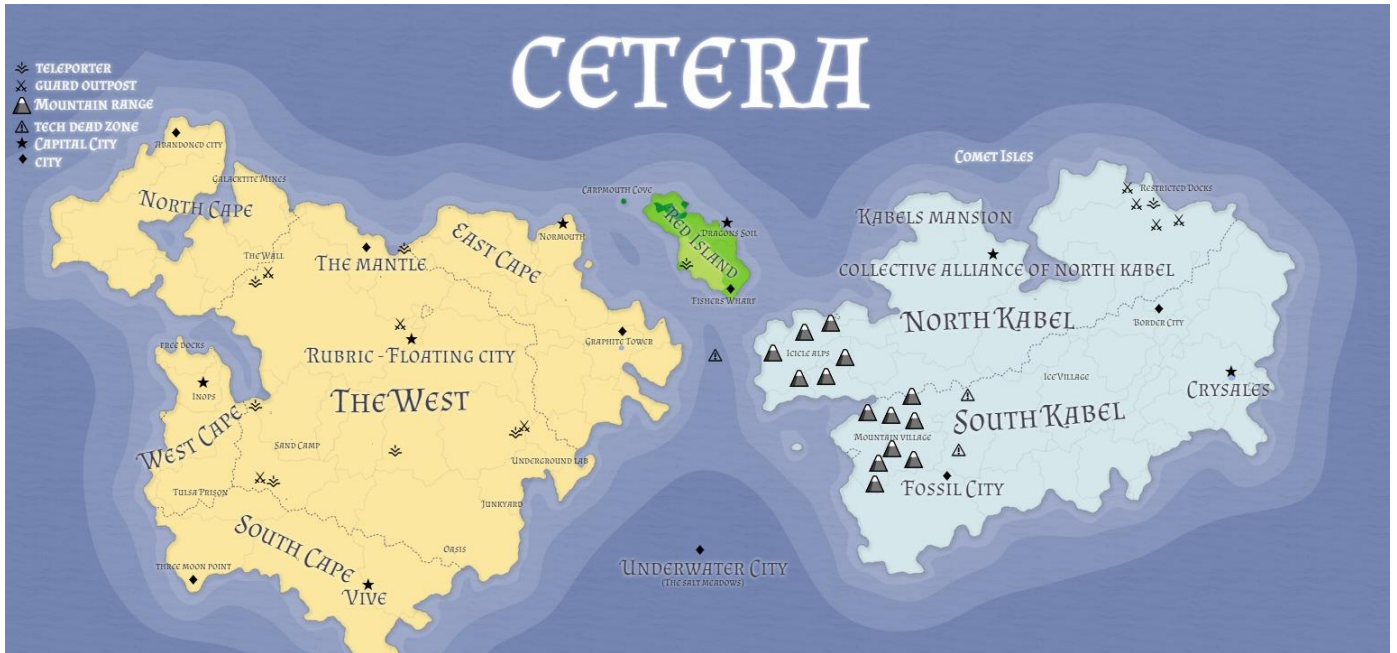
Name	Race/Species	Role	Age (Avg lifespan 160)	Pronunciation
Roth	Human	President	100	
George	Human	Vice-President	98	
Lilly	Human	George's daughter	10	
Khalid	Human	George's son	50	Kah-Lid
Verne	Human	George's bodyguard	60	
Lord Kabel	Human	Lord of Kabel	111	Kay-bel
Knell	Human	Council member – Red Island	102	Nell
Beth	Human	Biological Weapons expert	90	
Ribbon	Human	Lab tech – Beth's twin sister	90	
Dr Henley	Human	Medical Tech	145	
Mitch	Human	Lab Tech	95	
Kubro	Human	Muscle for Roth	Not known	Kew-bro
Mansyl	Human	PR adviser to Roth, Twin of Saed	90	Man-Sill
Saed	Human	PR adviser to Roth, Twin of Mansyl	90	Sah-eed
Ellbray	Kwewu	Muscle for Roth, Lees' sister	52	
Fenrir	Kwewu	War Commander – Vivé	80	Fen-rear
Lees	Kwewu	Second in Command of the Army of Vivé, Ellbray's sister	40	Lease
Kredo	Kwewu	War councillor- Vivé	100	Kree-do
Verd	Kwewu	War councillor- Vivé, Religious leader	148	
Fox	Kwewu	War councillor- Vivé	79	
Luria	Kwewu	Fenrir's wife	75	
Skar	Kwewu	Luc's older brother	16	Scar
Luc	Kwewu	Skar's little brother	9	
Granma	Kwewu	Skar and Luc's Grandmother		

Meri	Kwewu	Prisoner	17	
Diz	Kwewu	Leader of the anti-violence resistance	Not known	
Faye	Alien	Unknown	20	
Alice	Unknown	Unknown	Not known	



## MAP

# CETERA



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**BETH**

**Chapter 1: A Grave Announcement**

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My body temperature is two degrees below the population average. Womb undersized and cramped. Blood thick with my mother's insecurities. Today my baby will convince the world it lives in a warm paradise, siphoning its energy direct from my brain cells.

Blue light fills the stage. Roth's projection forms in front of the podium. He presses his sweaty palms against his black silk jacket. Ironed to perfection by a robot whose singular purpose is to iron suits. He straightens his obnoxious green tie, methodical, fingers each of his thick, gem-encrusted rings as his wide head turns to scan the room. While he adjusts the holographic mic, he flashes his G.R.A.Z.I.A. brace – thick silver purchased with his dead father's money. He lets out a gravelled cough to hush the crowd.

"Brothers and sisters. There's no place I'd rather be in this time of tragedy." Roth appears to look out over the crowd. "I am heartened by your smiling faces. But we must remember what we have lost. Great leaders." Roth pauses. "My father, Trudo, and my brother, Ren."

I shake my head. Men who died when one of their secrets met one of their enemies.

Roth places a hand over whatever organ he claims lives inside his chest. "It pains me to be the last of my great family to stand here. But you have voted for me to lead you into a new era and that's what I plan to do."

The people with all the credits voted you here, you mean.

"Good leaders are not free of minor lapses in judgement." Roth knits his brows. "My father initiated the Extinction Project two hundred years ago. He had a good heart, wanting to bring back long dead species. To see again the diversity of wolves and cats and deer, to bring the fruits of Earth

here, to Cetera. But genius and egos got the better of the lead scientists in the project, who are now under my sanction.”

The crowd holds their breath, ignoring their plummeting oxygen for a taste of his words.

“They grew demented experiments, hybrid wolf and human creatures who we now call Kwewu.” He says the word with a queer accent, like it’s the first time he hasn’t called them dogs.

The crowd boos and shuffles closer to the podium. More people join the feed as the news spreads across the capital. Whispers in the crowd come in bursts.

“Kwewu are people, not demented experiments!”

“What does he mean by ‘sanctioned’? Killed? Jailed? Where’s the justice?”

“They’re monsters, isn’t right what those scientists done.”

“You mean they did this on purpose?”

Wait till you hear our news, then.

Does anyone pay attention to G.R.A.Z.I.A. these days? I bite the tips of my nails raw. My part in the performance is coming up. I rub my taut stomach and whisper, “This is your time, show them what a woman I am.”

Roth hushes the crowd with a raised hand. “I come here to rid you of your greatest sadness. The plague that has left humanity clutching onto clones: our desolate infertility.”

You? Your part in this is almost nil.

“Once, we all dreamed of coming to Cetera to build a new society, but our bodies didn’t cooperate. For two centuries we have fought to survive, but today as it stands there is not one fertile human left on Cetera. As your new president, I promise you the gift of life.”

The crowd gapes and shuffles wildly. I spot a hooded person creeping around behind the last row of people. You'd be less inconspicuous with half an android face.

"But don't put your trust in only me. You all know Beth, the lead scientist of G.R.A.Z.I.A. Responsible for some of the medical advancements that keep you all cancer-free."

Roth points to me. I slide my hair behind each ear and check my glasses are straight. A deep, long breath settles the flutter in my stomach. I burrow my hands into my front pockets where quivering goes to die. Edging to the centre of the stage, I place both trembling hands against the podium and clamp my fingers on either side. My gaunt eyes wash over the crowd who remain vomit-inducingly attentive to my every move.

"Ahem." My throat clogs up. The eyes of the crowd swell into one overwhelming tidal wave. All my breath releases in one burst. "High levels of radiation can cause infertility." I grapple at stray lint in my blazer pockets. "In analysing the research of the sanctioned scientists, I have discovered that toxic levels of radiation were used to bind together the DNA from wolf and human cells to create the Kwewu. This is essentially our understanding at this time." I push my glasses with such force they indent into my nose. "The presence of Kwewu has formed a constant radiation wave. This inhibits human reproduction." Practised words, all I really needed to do was let them touch it. Rub their unsanitary hands against my stomach and feel its heart rattle through my skin.

My words fall back inside me as Roth shoves me to the side. The crowds' screams amplify, all directed his way. Were they not witnessing as projections, half the crowd would throw stones, the other would throw roses. Kwewu drop to their knees and shuffle nervously next to their human counterparts. Some humans cry, some rage, others hold their clone-children tighter than their real ones, but you can see some believe in my baby.

“Please, be silent, we do not mean to condemn the Kwewu, only to present you the facts. Beth has been isolated from Kwewu for over a year now.” Roth presses his cold hands against my belly, tightening my shirt enough to reveal a tiny bump. “And she is having my child.”

I pull my shirt down. I know the people will demand proof, they’ll demand tests and live ultrasounds, which Roth will undoubtedly provide. But my child won’t mean anything until it breathes.

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FENRIR

Chapter 2: Vivé's Commander

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*The Biography of Commander Jeb* hangs from the bookshelf. His gun and paw raised on the cover as if to fight gravity. Its spine, ostentatious gold text, leather bound with projection videos of Father in unscratched armour. His fur preened, claws sharp and ears perked to the moonlit sky. Gravity triumphs. The book's pages open like wings. It slams onto the ground, opened to page forty-five. The first line reads:

*If death has taught us anything, it is to defeat your enemies.*

The beginning of his speech at the peak of the clan wars. Words he said with howls as punctuation. Words my young wolf-ears never heard. Lessons the book would tell me instead of Father. I rub the dust off and push it back into place.

"Come back to bed," says Luria, flashing me her beautiful brown eyes.

Something outside warrants attention from my snout. The familiar scent of my war councillors, Verd and Fox. Their footsteps in sync, passing by my house. Luria's nose perks too.

"They're early," she says, threading her claws through her fur to untangle the bird's nest at the back of her head.

"Verd advised my father and his father before." Her long snout is highlighted with white fur, the rest coloured chestnut. I run my claw along it and behind her ears. "Not once was he late."

She nuzzles me. "You know, when I first met you, I was scared of you."

"Really?" I extend my claws gently against her cheek and plant a kiss on her head. "Why?"

She slides off the bed, the white sheets flutter off her, revealing her brown legs. "Your red eyes," she says.

“My Father’s.” A genetic trait. People speculated us half demonic, our deals with the devil granting us the power to win wars. Yet no-one disrespected Father, and he assured me no-one would ever disrespect me. So long as I always fought for my people.

“But now I find them so...” She breathes against my neck and kisses down to my collarbones. “Fierce.”

“Well, you know what?” I push her down on the bed and jump on top of her. “You can have them.” My body wants to burst through its skin. To roar at the moon. My fur pricks. Heat rushes through me. “Now I’m going to be late.”

.....

The Chrysos statue lures me in, as it does on each stroll around the city. I imagine him, alight in the sun, fighting with his influence instead of his jaw. Not using a single ounce of his godly power. I place a hand on the statue and close my eyes. I will be everything you hoped, Father. I won’t miss you until I’ve made you proud. I hold silent for a moment and then turn down the cobble path, past the monstrous manse of the Vice-President and into the council chambers.

“Commander Fenrir, have you seen the news?” Verd asks.

“What news?”

Verd falls silent.

Fox’s long, oil-tipped nose peeks in the door. He sniffs, creeps in, and leans against the wall silently. Arms folded like two swords across a shield. “President Roth has claimed his lover is pregnant,” Fox explains. “The only fertile human on Cetera. The theory being that she was isolated away from Kwewu, away from our toxic radiation long enough to conceive.”

“The Vice-President should be back from vacation. We’ll discuss this matter with him.”

“George will not be our ally. You must see this,” says Verd.

“George is our only human ally.” I shoo Verd away. “Find Kredo, let’s have this meeting.”

Verd scuffles off in his long, sack-like robes.

I tap the film-PC over my eye to replay the President’s inaugural speech. He presents himself as a carving of a good man, blessed with the right words for humans who can’t find their own. Sowing seeds in his people’s hearts so they can water and tend to them. Grow them large, let them blossom and flower. But one day, when my fur protects me from the rot of winter, the plants will curl like burning paper, redden as sunburn and fall to my human feet.

As the news sinks in, my blood pumps faster and my claws extend. They dig into my steel chair and scrape crooked lines into it until the ache in my nails and the screech in my ears is unbearable.

The projected window in the bricked meeting room lures me in. Vivé bustles with human and Kwewu life against the cold backdrop of silver buildings. Cobblestone roads culminate at the Chrysos fountain sparkling in the distance. Behind it, an endless flight of stairs leads to the Vice-President’s fortified manse. He calls himself the bald eagle that watches over the city. We see George more as a crow - but he’ll do anything to protect his daughter Lilly. If we keep her safe, he’ll side with us.

I spot Kredo. He gives the fountain a bump with his fist and drums through the door, dirt-red with curled, thick fur. Carrying an oversized carp on his back; must’ve been out to Red Island. The fish there are the fastest and strongest on Cetera but Kredo, ripe age of 100, always catches his prey. He flops the fish on our wooden meeting table. Smells like salt. A quick howl and he flings his boots on the table and his body into a chair.

“Human legs are crap for swimming. I’d trade them for wolf legs any day,” Kredo complains.

“And I’d still be the better swimmer.” I open the projection map of the Floating City and spin it so they can see the G.R.A.Z.I.A. headquarters. Verd shuffles in and stands in the middle of the



room. He braids his hands beneath the long sleeves of his robe. With his legs so well hidden, you'd never know he's half human.

Kredo turns to Verd and pulls his hunting laser from his ankle strap. He flicks it in the air a few times, catching it by the hilt and then shoving it into the wooden table.

"I hope you came here to do more than destroy the furnishings," Verd yaps.

Kredo slices the tail of the fish with his laser and shoves it raw into his wide jaw, crumbling the bone between his thick canines. "I came here to crush our enemies."

"There are no enemies here," says Verd. "We're all born from the same God."

"I can sure as hell see one." Kredo glares at Verd. He taps his claws against the wooden table and looks to me. "Verd informed me that I had to show my face here, but this affair is missing the sweet smell of women and wine." He pulls a coin from his pocket and flicks it around, spinning it like a wheel. A gold coin with a wolf on it. Some superstitious charm.

"I suppose you've been too busy hunting and whoring to hear the President's speech?" I ask, standing over him.

Kredo carves deeper into the table. "What'd that fucker say about us?"

"We're responsible for human infertility. For their impending extinction," I say. "The President's lover is pregnant after a long period of isolation from us, and when she has a non-clone child, it will prove it true to the humans."

"They'll despise us more than they did before." Kredo slaps his coin flat on the table. "So, we kill the baby or the President."

"Murdering an unborn child is a great sin." Verd chimes. "Chrysos will send you to the Daylands for that."

“Yes yes yes, children are sacred, blah blah blah.” Kredo gets up from his chair and walks toward the door. “The President it is then.”

“How easy it is to be you, Kredo, to just decide like that,” I mutter.

“What do you suggest?”

I lean against the wooden table and stare into the Floating City, tower in the middle, where President Roth sits on his throne, the guardian of his rich peons. A constantly moving masterpiece made of joints, suspended floors, and detachable rooms that slot in and out of place when the city demands it. “There are three pillars that protect a dictator,” I say. “Take down one, the rest will crumble. Target his rich supporters. G.R.A.Z.I.A.’s three biggest constituents are Rock Power, Rhys Pharmaceuticals and Matter Materials. Rock Power is based in East Cape, that’s our easy target. Cut their power, cut their source of life.”

“Their back-up generator will outlast our resource. We need more than a power outage,” Fox says. “We could garrison East Cape, it’s smaller and not well guarded. If we can hold it long enough to convince Red Island to join us, we’ll have an army in wait when G.R.A.Z.I.A. inevitably tries to steal back their land.”

“And what of George? He will stop this plan before it is born,” Verd says.

“George is dense as that ridiculous fucking silver doorbell on his front door,” Kredo growls. “Why the fuck do we let that prick hold up the mansion our ancestors built? There’s plenty of room for him and his two ingrate children in the rotten sewers.”

“Why do these councils have to be full of mindless prattle and wayward swears?” says Verd. “Commander Fenrir, I urge you to bring order here, your father would not have seen his warriors speak like dogs.”

“My father would never call his warriors dogs,” I say. “I urge you to speak in turn. If you have something worth my ears.”

“Our brothers and sisters are hostages in the capital,” says Verd. “We invoke war and we risk their lives. What Kwewu leader would see the innocents of the Floating City slaughtered?”

“The fucker’s bluffing. There’s no fucking baby and genocide isn’t the next logical step. He’s counting on us moving into the heavily guarded city we’ll never overpower.” Kredo moves within an inch of Verd, standing tall over him. “Verd, no disrespect, but you’re better with social flutter than war strategy.”

“Yes, well, wars are where warriors like you meet Chrysos. I intend to live.” Verd moves away from Kredo to me. “I ask you, as your father’s faithful adviser, please, tell George to negotiate a peace treaty. Beg him to spare the Kwewu innocents in the city.”

“Faithful adviser? He’s a religious nut, Fen. His place is at the church, not the war council!” says Kredo.

“That’s Commander to you Kredo, and Verd, if I ask him for that, I’d be announcing my intent to war.”

“I’ve seen your father, his brothers, and his clans fight before. It was wasted bloodshed. Wolves acting as primitive beasts against one another. If you go to the Eastern Cape, promise me to ask for their surrender before you attack?”

“This man hasn’t fought a war and has no right to tell you how to.” Kredo crosses his arms and glares at Verd. “Bloodshed and fighting’s in our bones, old man, don’t see nothing wrong with it.” He licks his fishy snout.

“I agree with Verd.” Fox chimes in, earning snarls from Kredo. “It would be easier if Eastern Cape surrenders and we can garrison there without loss.”

I look into Fox's serious eyes. He is not only an adviser, but someone I'd bet my life on. "I will give them a chance to surrender. Lives aren't to be wasted on fighting." I flash my canines.

"I do appreciate your favour, Commander Fenrir. You will be a great leader," says Verd.

"Hmph," Kredo spits. "If they surrender. G.R.A.Z.I.A. and their soldiers have never raised a white flag."

"Be thankful Lord Kabel isn't yet your enemy. The far East is a terrible place." Verd bows to me.

"Lord Kabel doesn't discriminate." I move the projection map to the ice-covered lands she rules. "She despises everyone equally." I scan the room. "Has anyone heard from Ellbray? Or Lees?"

"Not a bark," says Kredo.

"Right, let's wrap this up. In summary, we discuss our plan with Vice-President George, to take East Cape and side with Red Island. Do you all agree to this plan?"

"Hmph," Kredo storms out.

"You've made the correct decision," says Verd.

Fox places a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Don't doubt yourself. There's enough doubt to go around without yours."

With the meeting over, I make my way home. Vivé's moon rises, imprinting a soft blue glow on the buildings. Between two large silver structures, I find my modest three-roomed concrete shack. I sneak inside and shed my human attire, sitting on the edge of my bed. Luria wakes up at the sound of my boots sliding off. She crawls down the bed and plants a kiss on my snout.

"How did it go?"

"They want me to start a war." I sigh, throwing myself onto the comfort of the mattress.

"Between us and them?" She brushes her hands through my hair.

"Mmmh." There is no us and them.

"And what happens if we win?" Luria lies back down, curls around me and draws circles on my chest. I can see her mind ticking over, trying to lure me into saying something she knows I'm already thinking.

I stare at the dots of dirt scattered on our ceiling. "I guess we rule," I say in a flat tone.

"You rule?" she says, with a slight giggle.

"Mhm."

"Do you want to?"

She knows very well I don't. My father ruled his entire life. Sure, it gave him a legacy, but it also got him killed. "I'm not sure I'm made for it."

"The big leaders don't lead. They just sit in their towers, drink whiskey and let their peons do the work." She smiles. "I wouldn't mind lying about with you and doing the same."

"You're right. But I don't know if I could relinquish control. What if their decisions lead to more injustice?"

"Well, you wouldn't choose Kredo to do it, for sure."

"What about Fox and Verd?"

"Fox is smart and fair. Verd is... not loyal." She smiles ear-to-ear. "I can feel your muscles tense. You'll give yourself a heart attack if you keep getting so worked up." She laughs. "Verd doesn't serve anyone but Verd. Do not mistake his advice for loyalty."

"Verd serves our Heavenly Father, Chrysos."

“No, not quite.” She rolls away from me and stretches. “He serves his ego a little bit more than his God.”

“How do you know all this?” I turn on my side and stare at the cabinet, brimming with books only she has read.

Luria lies back into the silken cushions at the head of the bed. I lie with her. She rests her head against my chest and coils a strand of my fur around her finger.

“They treat me like a scanner-bot. Storing so much information they perceive it as useless, they should be more careful. I know the least about Fox, and that makes me think he’s careful, worthy of trust.”

“I should put you on my council.”

---

BETH

Chapter 3: The Pretty Brain

---

I expect to teleport back to my lab after Roth's hideous speech to continue my work with Subject Nineteen in the secrecy of the underground G.R.A.Z.I.A. facility. However, when the VR broadcast ends, we return to Roth's office. He succumbs to his leather chair with a smirk. I stand just a little too far from him, hovering by the door.

"I think that went well, don't you?" he says.

When I don't respond, he spins his leather chair away from me and awes over his floating buildings. Shined, dense with silver coats, moving and trading with each other, while he watches and broods over his empire. I edge back towards the exit.

"It's locked." Roth spins back toward me. He shines one of his rings. "My news will spread fast, like any in the capital."

My sweaty fingers slide off the door handle. "Can I go now? I have to check on Nineteen."

Roth jolts up from his seat and shuffles across the room. He grabs my shirt, places a chubby hand over my collar and fingers the inside, my chest, the bones that adorn my breasts.

"I need..." Roth grins as I recoil from his touch. "No, not *that*." His hands fall to my waist. "I'm not after a companion for my bed nor a beautiful arm to hold at a conference. I need the brain encased inside that thick beautiful skull of yours." He squeezes tighter. "Nineteen doesn't need you anymore."

I swallow a ball of phlegm and pull myself free from his pincers. He flips the lock and smirks at me. I hesitate. What game is he playing? I open the door and slam into someone.

“Take her to her room.” He brushes his hands through my hair and whispers in my ear,  
“Some place you can see the Boonlight but never feel its warmth on your skin.”

Kubro smiles.

Roth’s ‘muscle’ drags me from the office, past the teleporters I so desperately want to dive into, to one of the floating cars out the back entrance of the G.R.A.Z.I.A. headquarters. He shoves me in and locks the doors. The driver is shrouded in a black suit with a balaclava, safe behind a transparent divider. I don’t know where he’s taking me, but I doubt I’ll be analysing Subject Nineteen anytime soon. A speaker crackles on and his distorted voice rings through the mic.

“We don’t have long.”

“We...” My body tenses. “Is that you, Mitch?”

He throws a pen through a slit in the divider. I pick it up and spin it a few times. Metal etched with fine lines like motherboards. A pen with a hidden radio where ink should be.

“Who does it connect to?” I direct my eyes to his in the rear-view reflector and pillow my tone.

“Ribbon,” Mitch says with a bleak sadness in his voice as he continues driving below the air-speed limit.

“Can you do me one more favour?” A tear wells up in my eye. Mitch is a good soul amongst leeches.

“Anything.”

I can see only his brown eyes, wide, free of shadows and wrinkles. If I could choose a father for my baby, he would be the one.



“Set Subject Nineteen free.” The words stick to my tongue. I can’t believe I’ve spoken them. I’ve set in motion events I can never go back on. Once she’s free, Cetera will never be the same.

“How am I supposed to do that without getting caught?” says Mitch.

“Tell Ribbon for all I care. What’s she going to do about it?” My sister will look at Mitch with green eyes, Subject Nineteen with dollar signs, and realise that seeing my life’s work in ruin is more satisfying than the rest. She’ll let him release Nineteen without a second thought.

“Famous last words.” His tone is dry, but I hear the crack in his voice.

“Thank you, Mitch.”

The car thumps to a halt. I can no longer hear the hum of traffic or the chattering of people walking the streets. Mitch slams the door, locking it. I await my fate, gnawing at my lip and grasping the leather seat. I’m all alone now. Then the car door flings open. A pillowcase is thrown over my face and tightens around my neck. Engulfed in darkness, I gasp for air.

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LILLY

Chapter 4: Red Island

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The ocean eats up the speckled rocks with its big blue mouth. Sometimes the shadows in Red Island look like dancing ballerinas. In spring, all the moons get together and pull the water away from the beach. Plants grow tall. When it's hot enough, the Rushfoil flowers peek their heads out from the dunes like baby slugs. The flowers have yellow petals with grey leaves and a candy smell.

Dad calls to me as he climbs the dune, "You see, behind the green. Brush away the sand, the flowers might be buried."

"Dad, I think I've found it!" My nails fill with grains as I make a pouch for the plant. I pat the hole to stop more sand falling in.

"Do you see?" He puts his hand on my shoulder. "I told you it's the colour of your hair."

I look up to him. He calls my eyes 'big blue skies'. "Can I pick it?" I ask.

"Sweet child, I'd give you the world if you asked it." He pinches my cheek.

I pull out the Rushfoil and hold it very gently.

"A webbed vein of roots that twists to the bud," says Dad reading from his projection-watch. "Wrinkled, loose petals, a rich calming smell. This Rushfoil is at its peak. Now, squeeze it tight in your hand, crush it hard and warm it."

I bite my lips.

"Go on Lilly, it's okay," says Dad.

He wraps his large hand around mine and helps me close my fist. I pin my eyes shut, then open my palm and show it to him.

“I-it’s red now, Dad.”

“Dragon’s Blood. The beautiful flower has turned to resin,” he tells me, smiling as he lets go of my hand.

“It makes me sad.”

He wipes a tear from my cheek. “Dragon’s Blood can close wounds and let soldiers fight long after their time.” He presses on the powder and pushes it into the thin lines on my palm. “Don’t feel sorry for the flower, it’s stronger now.”

I nod and sniff. The winds brush away the Dragon’s Blood, leaving streaks on my toes and the ground underneath.

“I’d heard you’d taken vacation here, Vice-President George,” a voice echoes from behind us. We turn to see long, dark legs underneath a gold robe.

“Yet this is the first I’ve heard your voice,” says Dad.

“Our friends are not friends, George, I didn’t expect this to be a recreational visit.” The stranger folds his arms. I notice a cute owl on his coat pocket.

“Verne, take Lilly to her room,” Dad calls to his guard further down the beach and he comes galloping to us like a big bumbling horse. “You be good, we’ll come back and pick more flowers soon.” Dad kisses me on the forehead.

“Okay.” I smile. Why does he always have meetings at night in weird places? “Verne, let’s go get some ice-cream capsules!”

“Sure, Lilly.”

Verne marches me away and Dad and his friend disappear into the dark horizon.

“Verne, who’s Dad talking to?” I swallow the raspberry chocolate chip ice-cream capsule he picked for me.

“Someone of great importance to Red Island.”

“Oh! I know.” I slap his arm. “Red Island has councillors instead of Presidents, right?”

“That’s correct.” Verne holds my hand. He always does when Dad’s busy. “They make decisions about the island as a group with each opinion valued equally. President Roth does that too when consulting the council members or your father, but he always has what is termed as ‘overriding power’. His judgement is held by the people of the capital as the most valuable.”

“How come?”

“Because in the West it is believed that too many opinions make the important decisions take too long. However, on Red Island they think that every opinion comes together to shape one whole opinion, which makes the most people happy.”

“What one do you like?”

“Hmm... I’m not sure yet. Maybe you could come up with a third one.”

“Don’t be silly, if there was something better, you or Dad would have done it already.”

Verne leans down and puts his hand on my shoulder. “Don’t count yourself out yet.”

“That man I saw Dad with is one of Red Island’s council people, right?” I hop from shell to shell, skipping the ones with snails or crabs in them. Verne nearly tumbles over. It makes me giggle.

“Maybe.” Verne smiles. “But that isn’t for us to know.”

“Why not!?” I stamp, crushing the white horn-shell under me. “I’m his daughter, and you’re his guard, we should know all about these things.”

“Some might say we should be the last ones to know.”

“Huh?”

“His daughter and his guard might need protecting from such sensitive information.” Verne picks up the broken pieces of shell and buries them in the sand. “Maybe it’s best we do not know.”

“Don’t be silly.” I yank my hand away and skip ahead of Verne. “It’s always better to know things than to not know them.”

Verne looks away from me and at the sun that’s nearly gone for the day. “The more you find out, the less you’ll believe that. Now, come on, back to the hotel room.”

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**BETH**

**Chapter 5: The Blue Room**

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Roth has left me here for a week. In a room with wide windows and every shade of blue paint on the walls. Cabinets, bedside tables, and desks with accents of dark blue and light blue fill the emptiness. As if he thinks a colour might breach my womb and flip a genetic switch. Give the baby the Y chromosome he's been praying for.

Windowsills brim with seedlings bursting through soil, pale green and self-watering, so the likes of myself can't drown them before they flower. The room floats above any humans, androids or Kwewu who might love me, hate me or want to be me. A nice cushy bedroom where the shadows appear like bars across the bed as the moonlight filters through the blinds. I can pretend to breathe fresh air, rub my belly and smile at him. Whenever he decides he needs to see his precious baby again.

When I hear a sound at the door, I expect to see Roth's face, his flesh, but instead I'm greeted by the same brute that dragged me here, Kubro; a muscular human specimen with dark skin and thick blonde eyebrows. The kind of man most dream of having, right until they actually get him.

"He couldn't come himself?" I say.

Kubro smirks. "Aren't you excited to see me? I'm much easier on the eyes."

"But not the ears."

"You prefer his droning to my wit? Poor girl. I do wonder though." Kubro pulls out a crystal dagger and flips it back and forth in the air. "How it all happened."

"Maybe if you met a girl that could stand you long enough, you'd find out."

“Hah.” He catches the dagger and sheathes it. “No wonder he wants your spawn. How did you do it? Satanic ritual? Sacrifice to the Gods? Or is it all just a ruse for the people?”

“What do you want? I’m going stir crazy here. I can’t do my research in this place.”

“He doesn’t want to risk the baby.”

I walk to Kubro, stand straight and stare into his pale blue eyes. “He’s scared, isn’t he?”

“I saw the article about the pregnancy that Mansyl and Saed published; tight, logical, scientific, almost as if someone else wrote it.”

“So, you liked it then?” I ask.

“It had a lot of sciency mumbo-jumbo that, I assume, serves to convince the little people out there and placate some of the smarter ones. Though the ultrasound video was a tad excessive, don’t you think?”

“And which one are you? The little people?” I snort.

“Neither. In any case, I’m sure the public will start to resent the Kwewu once you pop that little demon out of you. They’ve started to already.” He steps closer to me. “You know, because the Kwewu’s radiation ‘killed’ all their potential babies.” He winks. “Mansyl and Saed may not look all that smart, but I have to commend their PR strategy.”

“Why? Because you’ve never made a strategic move in your life?”

“I hope you don’t think yourself some master strategist. Getting knocked up by Roth certainly didn’t land you where you wanted to be.”

“I want to talk to my sister! Let me talk to Ribbon.” I bash a closed fist against his wide chest. He doesn’t flinch. He plucks my wrist away, crossing his arms and letting that infuriating little grin sweep across his sculpted face.

"I hear she's made a comfy bed with your favourite employee... what was his name again?"

Kubro raises one of his brows.

I grind my back teeth. "I bet you'd love to tell Roth all about it, wouldn't you? A little puppet that preys on the weak. You think you're powerful? Because you end the lives of little annoyances now and then? You'll do anything for your master. You're more powerless than I'll ever be."

He chuckles. "A touchy subject. I can take life and I can let it go on, isn't that the ultimate power?" He squeezes my wrist. "I could take yours right now. Could you take mine?"

Scientific research has taught me to be patient. "I can wait to kill you."

"You know, I'd love to stay and chat, but I have the outside world at my feet. How about we get on with it?"

"Please." I reach out and touch his arm. "Tell Roth I need to talk to my sister. I can't take the isolation anymore."

"Smart, but so tactless with people." Kubro shakes off my hand. "You'll owe me a favour. Never give anything for free if you can trade it."

"Of course." I push out a smile.

"I'll let him know. Remember, you owe me one."

"I promise, I won't forget." No, I won't forget that sick look you gave me. I won't forget for a second any sleight you make against me and I'll repay the favour my friend, I'll repay it back to you in droves.

"Now, Roth told me to give you this, and make sure you actually take it."

I look at the capsule in his large hand. Clear coated, specs of orange on the inside. My eyes widen and Kubro notices. He doesn't know what it is.



“Is this some kind of joke?”

“He said you’d know what it is and what it means.”

I gulp, my throat dry, unable to whisper a breath. Why would he do this? He has me right where he wants me, he’s spent years hammering me into the right shape. Why go this far?

“I can’t take that capsule!”

“He said the baby will be fine. Dr Henley checked it.”

“No doctor alive knows what will and won’t kill my baby. I’m not going anywhere. I want this baby as much as he does!”

I press my hand into my swollen stomach and my gut churns. Twists and turns within myself, like blades against my squishy organs. Maybe the capsule is a life sentence, but my mentors told me no baby would be birthed again and I’m about to birth one. I’ve never failed to unravel the science my predecessors built. Maybe I can correct this later.

“Take it, or I’ll make you.” Kubro pushes the capsule into my hand.

I look at it for a moment before looking back to Kubro, whose eyes glisten with the reflection of the moons outside the window. I think of ways I could pretend to take it, ways I could fool the fool before me, but in the end, Roth would come and test it and I’d be all the worse for it. Maybe he’d board up my windows or stick me with Kubro’s boring chatter for days on end. Then, when he had a chance, a break from his political adventures, he’d make me take the purple and blue capsule again, and I don’t know how many more of those I can make it through.

“They give this to the prisoners of Tulsa. The rapists, child murderers and serial killers, the worst of the worst.” I swallow the capsule. “Like them, I’m now property of G.R.A.Z.I.A.” Property of him.

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**SKAR**

**Chapter 6: Civil Unrest**

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Silver buildings kiss the clouds, slicing puffs of white into dots and stripes. I point to a building floating so high it casts a shadow over me and Luc.

“The new President lives there. They say the roof hits the sun sometimes,” I tell Luc.

He stamps his foot against the silver-coated pavement and crosses his little arms.

“The sun would melt it! Do you know how hot the sun is?”

“Don’t get your fur in a bunch, it’s just a story.”

I pry his arms from his chest and pull him down the alleyway shortcut, whizz past a few robot coin-gatherers and salivate my way around the petri-meat trader. The human behind the counter shifts his stare between my fur, snout, and molten gold eyes.

He whispers, “Come ‘ere dog, I’ve got your kinda slop.”

“No thanks,” I say. The man grunts.

Humans block my path. They recoil as the tips of my fur brush against their exposed skin.

“Why they looking at us funny?” Luc asks as two women exchange whispers and squint at him.

Hell, even Luc’s noticed. “They’re probably wishing they had fur as shiny as yours.”

“They don’t even have fur. You’re lying again, aren’t you? Like when you said our iguana wasn’t a robot.” Luc raises his voice.

“You loved Spike! You know, a good brother would just pretend to believe the lie.”

“I’m done with lies. I wanna know the truth!”

"Fine then. Here's some truth. Chrysos isn't real, how's that for you?" I blow a raspberry with my snout.

"Stop lying!" Luc flaps out his tongue and marches backwards down the street.

"It's true. He's just the first wolf that had yellow fur."

"He's a god, Skar! You can't make that stuff up."

"Oh yeah? How did a wolf run around if he was made of gold huh? Be a bit heavy."

"He's a God! He's really strong." Luc lifts his puny arms and attempts to bulge his biceps.

"Okay, sure, but how did he hide the moon so that the two clans would stop fighting, hmm? The moon's awful big, where did he put it?"

"Like I said, God." Luc bumps into a human and knocks her to the side. She trips and lands on her knees. I rush over to her and hold my paw out.

"Get off me, you child killers!" she shouts.

Luc nestles into me. His eyes wet my chest.

"He didn't mean it. He's just a kid, lady."

"You're lucky you have one!"

"We're sorry, ma'am."

"Sorry won't give me a child!"

The other humans in the street swarm. Frozen and plenty. The crowd grows more silent as the woman edges closer.

"You monsters shouldn't be here." She points a rigid finger my way. "You're killing us!"

Monsters? “Come on Luc, let’s get out of here.” I wipe his tears and leave the raving woman on the street. Before I can escape from the plaza, a dark hand grabs my shoulder and jolts my claws from their bed.

“People shouldn’t be so cruel,” a man’s voice says.

I spin around. Two identical men are behind me. Side by side. Same posture. Same off-putting smile. Twins.

“Such outbursts are not what the President wants,” the other twin says.

“What are your names, little ones?” The two bend down and twist their heads to one side like they’ve broken their necks.

“S-Skar... and u-uh... this is my brother, Luc.”

“We work for President Roth. Brothers, like you, and we always have careful eyes on the street. Feel safe.” Both men raise their eyebrows. “We’ll keep watching.”

I smile and push Luc behind me. With a shared look, the two men walk off, in sync, and disappear into the distance. We make the rest of our trip on the roadside to avoid any more human outbursts. In a short time, we reach our favourite capsule vending machine.

“Sorry Luc, people can be—”

He cuts me off. “Meanies!” Luc stares into the machine with empty eyes.

“I was going to say complicated.”

“You don’t think they’re mean?”

“No.” I press my wrist-chip into the vending reader and drool over the ice-cream flavours.

“They’re just scared.”

“What of?”

“Going extinct.”

“And they think we’ll make them extinct?”

I shrug. “Maybe they’re just trying to find someone to blame.”

I click the ice-cream icon on the touch screen and two capsules plonk into the receptacle. I give the raspberry and chocolate chip one to Luc.

“What about you?” he asks.

“There’s not enough for me. You enjoy it.” I muss Luc’s hair. “This one’s for Granma.”

We roll into the lounge as we arrive home.

“You’re right where we left you,” I say to Granma who’s still planted in her armchair.

She gulps the capsule back. “Mmmm, thank you deary.” Then plants a sloppy kiss in between my ears.

Luc flops in front of the projection television and squints at it. *The Wings of the Wolves* is playing.

“Why are some wolves wearing them things around their necks?”

“The collars? It was before the clan wars. Beta wolves wore them.”

“Not no more?”

“Chrysos ended that.”

“You mean the God wolf?”

“He’s one of us. I think some people might have put him on a pedestal.”

“Too right!” Granma yells. “The further back the memory, the more a pile o’ hooley it becomes!”

“So, it’s like us and the humans?”

“Well...” I halt, not sure how to answer him.

Granma swings in her chair. “The humans made us but they ain’t no Gods, don’t go calling ‘em Alphas or they might get ideas.”

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**FAYE**

**Chapter 7: The Salt Meadows**

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I can only breathe a little bit. “My abomination of a sister wants to set you free,” Ribbon says. “She sends her little lover boy to sneak in and bust you out. Not a fucking chance. Wait till she sees your mangled corpse at the bottom of the Junkyard. We’ll see if lover boy gets his reward then,” she rambles. She rips the blindfold off my face and pushes me out of a floating car.

My bones bounce off metal as I hit the ground. My empty stomach flips and folds on its shrunken self. I haul my disjointed spine against a solid wall. A disturbed comfort, reminder of home; cold, dark, decorated with my blood. The lid crashes shut.

The chew of metal against metal jolts me upright. Four walls around me close in. Waste crumples against my body as I’m shoved to the centre of the bin. I’m trapped. Palms drenched and sticky. It sensed another piece of trash and turned itself on. I hurl my flailing hands into the lid. Jammed shut. I wonder if there’s more of my flesh in this bin than hanging off my skeleton. Snap out of it. I’m free now, I cannot die here. I throw my hands into the mass of empty ammunition shells, disarmed warheads, and smashed glass. Auto-pilot. The nerves in my arms disconnect from one another. There. A malformed metal cutter. Abandoned in the defectives pile. Just like me. I ram it into the middle of the bin. Muscles tense, veins bulge, teeth screw together. My knees whimper and shiver. With a desperate heave, I shave a slit into the middle of the bin. The walls hug my sides. My skeleton soon to be a pile of bones. A cheap funeral. I throw away the cutter and shove my calloused hands inside the slit. My chest and arms throb, the muscles contort. I make enough room for my paper-thin body to slide through. Jump out, roll away and dive behind the trash compactor. It flattens everything.

The shadows warp and change. I inhale grainy air and exhale through threadbare lungs. A warmth pelts me from above. My skin feels the sun for the first time. Flesh sizzles and roasts from the outside in. Like an air shower set to scalding, perhaps similar to a mother's embrace.

I spot a tall, octagonal shaped structure, moss coloured. It sighs in the wind. I drag my bones along the hot sand, gripping the ground with flayed fingernails. The structure is sandpaper, light like plastic. I sneak a peek through the door to find a small vacuum toilet. The sour smell burns my nose hairs. It's the only source of shade in the barren perimeter around the compactor. Escaped prisoners can't be choosers. A portable machine that sucks human waste into the star that keeps them alive. Like everything else, it's emblazoned with the acronym 'G.R.A.Z.I.A.'.

My mothwing arms are like dust as the sun fries them. I gnaw my lips into patchwork. Seconds warp into hours as I drift away from consciousness. The sweat dries. Eyelids relax. A moment passes.

An icy chill smacks me in the face. Each breath sharpens. I wrap my arms around myself, and tremble as the chill enters my lungs. Is this what the Icelands are like? A gooey wetness bunches underneath my nose. No smell of toasted desert sand or my stale armpits. That's my silver lining. Everything itches. Dead skin packs under my nails. Itchiness... coldness... I read about that somewhere... early signs of frostbite. I rub my feet together like tinder.

*You know what you could do.* A disembodied voice whispers at me.

Shadows flicker and disappear between shards of moonlight.

"No," I say, teeth clattering, "No way."

*But what have you got to live for?*

My eyes dart around the desert, finding no-one. I try to reply, but when I open my mouth, everything goes black.



When I come to, my hair is tangled and salted with grease. Water claps in the distance. Drained of blood, I slide through sand and roll into the water. Long enough for the sun to escape and the moon to rise again.

The purr of an engine cranks my tired eyelids open. A G.R.A.Z.I.A. hover-motorbike, Galaxy model A250, floats a hands-width from the ground. Slick black spattered with sand. Riding it, a body of gold metal armour, shielded from head to toe. When they step off, the motorcycle folds itself flat into a 4cmx4cm cube. They wrap their cold gauntlets around me.

“You’re injured.” A feminine voice. Her helmet has no visor or eyeholes. She stares at me through a micro-camera.

My shoulder muscles sink from their sockets and my blood slows. My hands, pale. Mind, static. I try to engineer my lips to move, but my voice buries itself inside my rib cage.

“Take this.” She pulls something from a flap in her wrist armour. It looks like a blood-brain syringe. She presses it against the nape of my neck. “This sealing agent acts as a local anaesthetic. You shouldn’t feel any more pain.”

The syringe exhales. A numbness I’ve never felt before. She picks me up, my legs dragging behind. I don’t have the energy to fight her, whoever she is.

She brings me to the edge of the beach where a G.R.A.Z.I.A. TX500 submarine floats in the water. The fastest deep diving model the ocean has seen. Pod-shaped, small, a civilian model. She struggles with the neuro-print lock as I dangle from her side. The hatch pops open and she slips me into the passenger seat, pressing a green and orange button as she enters. The translucent dashboard lights up.

“I know a safe place. Deep underwater,” she says.

I slouch my head against the glass window and watch the sub swim deeper and deeper. The underwater isn't like the dry, suffocating underground I'd spent my entire life suffering beneath. It's smooth and flowing. Cradling us as it lowers us down to the sea floor. My brain sinks into its cranium.

Pink pastel corals wave at me. Gangly and slow. Giant lime kelp rustle and part for us.

I find my voice again. "Who are you?"

Her stiff, robotic body sinks into the drivers seat. Her voice is muffled through dense layers of gold. "We have a mutual friend," she says. She reaches for the gearbox, revealing the G.R.A.Z.I.A. symbol engraved under her shoulder joins.

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LILLY

**Chapter 8: Happy Birthday Dad**

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I wake up to two pink and green parrots dancing on my balcony windowsill. They make funny noises at each other, screaming back and forth like Dad and Mamma used to. I roll out of bed and run towards them, but as they see me get close, they flap their pretty wings and disappear into the forest. I spin around so my nightgown flutters like their wings. The pleats at the bottom look the best. I hear a knock at my door and then Verne comes in.

“Come, Lilly, your father is ready to go.”

“Already?”

“Let me help you pack.”

Verne dumps my clothes and toys into my silver and pink suitcase.

“Hey! Dolly can’t go at the bottom. Her hair will get ruined.”

Verne dives into my clothes and puts Dolly at the top. “There we go, come on.” He grabs my arm.

“But I’m still in my jammies!”

“That’s ok, we’re taking your father’s submarine.”

He hurries me out the door, carrying my suitcase and pulling me faster than he normally would. We dash along the toasty sand, slip past the Rushfoil patches, and find the sub at a dock where no one else seems to be.

“Let’s go,” says Dad. His face is all screwy like when he eats sour capsules. His business meeting must have been annoying.

“Dad!” I make a silly face.

“Come on,” he says.

He’s in a grump. I get in the sub, Verne follows and sits in the driving seat, and Dad closes it. We go down underwater, but I’ve seen it all before. I wanted to stay at Red Island, where everything is different and interesting. Now I have to go back to stupid Vivé and see the same things I always see.

“Knell will come around, Sir. He wants the same things as us.”

“Not in front of her. And what did I tell you about calling me Sir?”

“Sorry Sir,” Verne mumbles.

I fall asleep in the sub and when I wake up, I’m back in my own bed and there’s no pretty birds on my balcony windowsill. But that’s okay because today’s a special day. I spring out of my room and dart down the halls. I swoosh past Verne and maybe even my brother Khalid on the way. I slow when I reach Dad’s office. I’m not usually allowed inside, but I’m sure he won’t mind on a day like today. I tip-toe in but the floor creaks and he catches me.

“Morning kiddo.” His sour face is completely gone.

“I haven’t forgotten!” I shout.

“Forgotten what, hun?”

“It’s your birthday today!”

“Oh? Is it?”

“I got you something!” I skip over and pull an oblong shaped gift from behind my back.

“And where did you get the credits for that?” he asks.

I look away and a grin fills my pink cheeks. "My allowance credits." I put the gift on his desk.  
A black case wrapped in a grey bow. "Now, open it."

"Alright, alright, hold your atoms."

He pulls the bow apart and opens the lid on the box. Inside, on a velvet white cloth, lies a shiny pen. It's engraved 'For Dad' and has swirls of sparkling gold and orange, lined with silver.

"A pen!" he exclaims.

I smile and pull it from the case. "It's super old and from Earth. You click this button and you can type on things."

He unclicks the pen and places it back in the case and puts the case in the centre of his empty desk.

"Thank you, hun." He gets up off his fancy leather chair and kisses my forehead. "It's the best present."

"That's okay Dad." I smile.

"I have something planned for us to do today. I think you'll love it." He holds my hand and leads me down the steps into the East Wing study. He dims the lights and tells me to stand in the middle of the room with my eyes closed.

"I know you love to learn about Earth and what it was like, so I made this for you." He flips a switch. "Open your eyes kiddo," he says.

My eyes fly open and my tongue rolls out my mouth. A beautiful projection of Earth covers the entire room.

"This is a rainforest on Earth. Lots of beautiful animals lived there."

It feels like magic. Other than Red Island, the planet is made of either desert or snow. In Vivé, you hardly ever see anything that isn't the colour silver.

"On Earth, all sorts of animals lived. Some places were pleasantly warm, others sticky and hot, some chilly, or freezing cold. There were even plants that ate animals on Earth. You see those green leaves floating along the river?"

"Yeah!" I squeal.

"That's a giant water lily."

"Like my name!"

"That's right. Majestically floating along the river."

"What was the weather like there?" I ask, crawling along the ground to spot little creatures.

"Boiling hot like your strawberry tea, sometimes it rained constantly."

"I've never seen rain!"

"On Earth it used to rain all the time. Luckily, we have the Boonshield."

"Look at that!" I yell, pointing to a green slimy little insect with red bulging eyes and dark yellow webbed feet. "What's that?"

"Let me check." Dad looks at the animal records and takes a capture of the creature to search for it. "They called it a red-eyed frog. It apparently liked water and land."

I clap and try to poke at it, but my finger goes through the projection.

We hear a high-pitched caw sound and look above. Something flies in the sky, wings like space planes outstretched. "Wooow."

"That's called a macaw. Birds, like the parrots on Red Island."

I slump on the ground and make my forehead all wrinkly.

"I've seen that look before."

"Dad, I'm angry that they're all dead." I cross my arms.

"Well." He puts down the record tablet and sits cross-legged next to me in the middle of the beautiful fake rainforest. "They're not dead per se. You know G.R.A.Z.I.A., where I work?"

"Yeah?"

"We kept the DNA of all the animals from Earth when we came to Cetera. DNA is what makes us look the way we do. So, maybe one day we can bring them all back."

"Why can't we bring them back now?" I frown.

"We tried to, we managed to make the Kwewu, and there are fifteen breeds of dog out there in the world. Some animals can survive the tropical weather at Red Island, and there's a few snow bunnies over on Kabel. But all the other animals and plants can't stand the desert weather here, or the lack of other animals to eat."

"But I've seen plants at the Capital!"

"They're synthetic, do you know what that means?"

"Umm...." I stop and push my hand against my forehead. "Someone made them?"

"Correct. Just like the capsules we eat, and the nanomachines that keep us healthy. The Boonshield controls the weather, it doesn't encourage life."

"But the plants on Red Island? The Dragon Blood flowers, are they real?" I remember the one I picked. It was dusty and smelled better than my rose perfume. It rattled, like there was water running inside it, and it looked to the sun to keep warm.

"Their tourism commissioner says so, but I suspect that only the fish and birds are real."

“What about that Beth lady, they say she’s pregnant with a real baby human.”

Dad jumps back and stares at me for a long time. His smile droops to a flat line. “You know about that?”

“Duh Dad. I could hear people talking about it from my room in Red Island.” The ladies there seemed excited and they said that Beth was ‘destined to be the first’. “But I was born from Mum, so, aren’t I a real human too?”

He stares at me for a short bit and puts my hair behind my ears. “Of course, you are. What else would you be?”

“Sir.” Verne walks into the study. His eyebrows look pointy like fingernails and he has his dog tags wrapped up in his hands. “I-I’m sorry to disturb, Sir.”

“I’ve told you to call me George.”

“Yes, S-Sir George, I apologise but, your war commander demands an audience.”

“Sigh.” He musses my curls. “Shouldn’t be long.”

“Is the cute wolf here!?” I skip over to Verne and tug on his shirt.

“Uh, yes Lilly, but Fenrir only wants to speak to your father.”

I cross my arms. “Aww but I wanna see him, Dad!”

“Maybe later, hun.”

Verne whispers into Dad’s ear. “Happy birthday, Sir.”

“It’s George! You know I hate these formalities.”

“Sorry George, I’ll leave you now – the commander is in your office.”



I like Mr Fenrir. He's so much taller than everyone else, he'd put me on his shoulders when I was little so I could boop the Chrysos statue on the nose. He used to be around a lot more before President Roth and Dad started talking all the time. I wish he'd go away so Mr Fenrir could come back to the house and play with us. I heard Dad telling Verne that Roth didn't like wolves because his brother was one and his mum and dad were human, but personally I'd love it if my brother Khalid was a wolf instead of a big bully.

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ELLBRAY

Chapter 9: Right-Hand Wolf

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I keep my hood tight, flattening my ears. My nose sheathed, with only my eyes peeking out from the shadows. Their human scent squeezes through the fibres in the cloth. Sickly, like candied vanilla. It wafts from their pores in dense bursts. Overpowers the fresh oak smell of the wolves scattered around the lower level of the Floating City. My nostrils didn't sting this much in Vivé. Lees is lucky father let her stay there, live out her life as a warrior in the great Vivé army, Jeb's legacy. She doesn't watch homeless Kwewu struck by curdled spit as they beg for capsules. She can't hear their muffled whines as their life fades. Forgotten, unmourned, swept aside like street litter. My body has been here since Trudo's death, but my heart remains in Vivé, waiting to be reunited.

A shop cloaked in dust lures me in. Its name dots of rust, windows smudged with paw-prints and fingerprints. Lights missing, broken, or switched off. Fallen mannequins shaped like wolves with human legs. Clothes printed for baby Kwewu, designed to soothe their furred torsos. Floating cots, big enough to hold an infant wolf. Nose protectors for the cold, dummies solid enough to survive a canine bite, supersized milk capsules. I can imagine the humans passing by here, praying for their own little ones, desperate to spread their misery. President Roth has finally given them hope, and an excuse to wipe us from their planet. The store creaks and sighs. The glass 'liquidation sale' sign snaps from its hanging cord and smashes into sharp edges. The screech of the crash brings me back into the moment. I leave the desolate walkway of dead Kwewu shops and whip past the wolf-fur traders. The smell of decay makes me dry retch. I slip into a thin alleyway next to it made of red brick and find the small alcove at the end. Rocket's there, staring intently at my pockets. I scan my card and authorise the credits he wants. The price rises every week. He steps aside to let me through the heavy platinum door. It leads to my silent hallway. To my undecorated hotel room. I pull down my hood and let the robot scanner's red light sweep over the ridges on my face.

“Authorisation accepted,” it says, sliding the door to my room open.

I watch it over and over. The speech by the new ‘President’. An insult to his own father and brother, Trudo and Ren. Trudo whispered one or two lies when necessary, fudged a few G.R.A.Z.I.A. figures now and then, but he proudly seated me at his council table next to the humans. I remember Ren’s eyes, green shards similar to Trudo’s. His nose always wet. Ren out-staged Roth, both with quicker wit and a more extravagant suit. He’d wink at me and nudge Roth. You could always see the moment Roth’s anger exploded by the throbbing vein behind his ear. In those serious moments, Ren and I always shared a quiet chuckle. But somebody murdered Trudo and Ren. They were forgotten the moment Roth launched their ashes into the cosmos.

“Saw you snooping around.” A voice interrupts my thoughts.

I spin around. Roth smiles and adjusts his gold chain. How did he sneak past security?

“Never expected my father’s right-hand dog to attend my inaugural speech. I’m glad you haven’t forgotten your place.”

He doesn’t have a sweet, trusting face like Trudo, or a melodic voice. The only semblance of Trudo left on Cetera is the chin dimple they shared. One I might slice off, cut the connection for good. The murderer has come to me. Maybe he’s here to confess. Either way, he’s walked straight into the den of a dragon that’s been aching to fry something. I jump to my feet, but the coward doesn’t flinch. He’s unarmed and alone, still smirking.

“Father never told me exactly what use he had for a dog like you.” He smirks from ear to ear. “I’d love to know.”

I narrow my eyes. Sniff the air. The absence of that disgusting smell. The sheen of blue. It’s a projection of Roth. I’m not surprised, even he isn’t dense enough to think nobody suspects him. Roth miraculously survives when all his relatives mysteriously perish, leaving him the only heir. Not suspicious at all.

“What I did for him is none of your business,” I say.

Roth claps. Slowly. “That fire within you, he must’ve adored that.”

I snarl, gritting my teeth. “Whatever it is you think you know, you know nothing. Scum.”

“I didn’t come here to fight with you, dog.” Roth smooths down a piece of stray hair. “I’ve heard of your loyalty and strength, and I want to make that mine.”

“My name’s Ellbray.” He’ll never own me.

“How about it? Do you want to work for my family again?”

“I wouldn’t work for a man like you.” My gums ache as I crush my teeth together. “You’re not half the man your father and brother were.”

“Well, my brother was literally only half a man. You know, it won’t be easy being a Kwewu in the coming months as my child grows and the humans become restless. A wise dog would place herself at the side of the President.”

I ball my fists. I don’t need his protection.

“But I can tell by the fire in your eyes, you don’t care about that, do you? What is it you care about? Finding out why Ren and Trudo died?”

“What do you know of it?” He probably did it with his own hands so he could feel the life leave them.

“Almost nothing. But I intend to find out more.” Roth adjusts his cuffs. “And, as you can imagine, those that sleight me know no end to their suffering.”

He wants to punish someone... is he lying to lure me in? Did he not do it? “And if it was you that snuffed out their lives, what will I find out?”

Roth laughs and inspects the various jewels adorning his fingers. "Then I suppose you'll find an excuse to snuff out mine."

A man who smiles at the sound of murder. Who cares more about a crinkle on his suit than the city he lives above. G.R.A.Z.I.A. grunts would lick the bottom of his shoes if commanded. It would be easy for him to eliminate me and yet I'm still alive. I can feel my jaw unclench.

"Work for me." He holds out his hand. "I promise to call you a wolf and not a dog."

You'll find out what happened, or I will. One or both of us will die. Either way, we'll die knowing the truth. "Then I'll call you President instead of scum."

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**FENRIR**

**Chapter 10: An Unshared Drink**

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George enters his office, frowning, and sits down to inspect a long metal object inside a decorative case. I stare into his eyes and tap my claws against the chair. His bald head as shined as the glass cabinet behind him.

“Are we speaking in confidence?” I say.

George opens his arms. “Do you see anyone?” Pressing his hand onto his liquor cabinet. It nips his skin, checking the DNA. Pulls out an antique bottle of whiskey. He pours a sip into two short glasses and tops it with chilled marble ice cubes. Slides the drink across his polished desk and sips at his. I get up from my seat, ignoring the gesture.

“I’m here about the President’s speech.”

He sighs. “I knew this would come, but on my birthday, really? Can’t it wait a day?” He swigs back the rest of his whiskey and pours another. “I’m handling it.” He keeps the glass in his hand, tapping the side with his index finger pensively. “How old do you think I am?”

“Sir, as your war commander, I demand to know how you’re handling this situation.”

“It’s classified. You’re the warrior and I’m the politician, remember? This was always the agreed upon division of labour. Let’s just say that we have friends in places we’d forgotten. You know I’m turning ninety-eight today.”

“We... Sir?” I fold my arms and step away from the desk. “Does ‘we’ include Kwewu?”

“I don’t make a distinction. Now sit! You’re making me nervous. Can’t we chat about lighter things like my increasingly old age?”

I hesitate and then take a seat, but leave the whiskey untouched. "With respect, my soldiers won't lie down unless they know they're safe. The news threatens our existence on Cetera."

"Roth won't move until that baby is born and breathing. We have time, Fenrir." He raises an eyebrow and swills his drink. "The less you know the better. I don't want you making any rash moves."

"I've heard there's already stirring in the city. Some Kwewu have been verbally attacked."

"Hardly an emergency. Kwewu have been denounced by the Capital for years."

"Not like this, George." My fists tighten. "They're screaming abuse at children."

"What would you have me do?"

"Nothing, half the army will protect you here. The other half will garrison East Cape and attack the Capital."

George snorts and slams down his glass. "Oh, so you'd beat an army 100,000 strong, half of which are either drones or androids. What of that weapon we keep hearing about? What if Roth brings that to the battlefield?"

"Another rumour. We'd only need to beat the small army at East Cape and side with Red Island. They can make up our numbers."

"What's in it for them?"

"They get their land back."

"If you win, you'll hand them the Capital?"

"It'll be for us both."

"Do you think they'll agree to send their entire army to die by G.R.A.Z.I.A. so they can share their land with you?"

“And for the liberation of the Kwewu.”

“Liberation?” George stands with a slight stagger. “There's no one to liberate. Listen, if you act on this plan, we all die.”

“You seem so certain.”

“I am. If you go to East Cape, you and your army will die. Let me handle this. You have to trust me.”

.....

Trust him, he said. I recount his words in my head as I pull my slouched body down his never-ending stairs. What would father's book say about this? *Your allies are as valuable as the actions they take. Inaction is as severe as betrayal.* Black and white. George's guards watch me from the manse door, their armour clipped on, guns loaded with plasma donations from the poor people of the Floating City. My walk home gives me no clarity. My distrust and scepticism of George pushes at my temples, urging them to burst. I find Luria hanging out of the bed and push her head gently back onto her pillow, wrap her in a blanket and kiss her between her eyes. A smile flutters across her face.

I travel straight to my council chambers, only to find Diz waiting for me. Diz is the last part-Kwewu, part-human, part-machine freak I want to see early in the morning.

“I've barely had my caffeine capsule and you're already here,” I say, slumping into my chair.

“Good sunshine, Fenrir,” Diz replies.

“To what do I owe the displeasure?”

Diz looks so convincing, a standard wolf torso and human-like legs, but inside it, wires and chips, all bleeping the secrets of Vivé to G.R.A.Z.I.A. in ultrasonic tones. Diz was their first attempt at



controlling the Kwewu, turning them into a new wave of fodder for the army. An embarrassing failure that I now have to deal with.

"I have a group of ten who would like you to heed our council. We call ourselves the Anti-Lethal Violence Rebellion," says Diz.

"Why should I listen to a robot?"

"I am not a robot."

I'm sure that's exactly what it's programmed to say. "So, you're one-third robot? What's the exact percentage?" I laugh.

"Well, my torso is Kwewu and human, and my brain is part robot. I have robot legs, but I do not see the relevance this has to the AVR."

"I don't take my orders from abominations like you. You're lucky they let you live here, branded with G.R.A.Z.I.A. barcodes, probably a spy. Yet, because you have fur, they showed you mercy. And now, the abomination comes in here and asks me to hold back violence against its maker. I wonder who sent you?"

"It was decided by the group, nine votes of ten, for me to come here. We do not mean to propose you stop all violence. It is just the lethal kind we wish to end." Diz moves closer; a rigid, un-oiled robot. "The AVR believe wars can be won without death."

"They clearly sent you as a joke." I turn my chair away.

"I ask with honey, please listen to our plan."

"They sure did screw up your programming. No wonder they threw you away," I say with a growl.

“All we ask is a resolve without fatal operating system error. We can alternatively make contacts in the Capital and kidnap the President. When we have him in chains, we can barter for our freedom.”

“We don’t barter for our freedom, we take it,” I say.

“We could kidnap Beth too; her life could be traded for a peace treaty.”

“A great plan, were it possible to just kidnap Roth and his heavily guarded partner. Nobody knows where he is, all of his communications are via satellite projection, none are traceable.”

“There will be someone who knows President Roth’s longitude and latitude,” says Diz in her stunted, mechanised voice.

“And you plan to find out who?”

“Though I am outdated, I still have some insights about the G.R.A.Z.I.A. system, and we have a hacker within the AVR. We could turn one of Roth’s trusted agents against him.”

“What you’re asking will take time we might not have. Go ahead, formulate your plan, but if it doesn’t come before mine, we’ll throw it out the window in a heartbeat.” If only I knew what my plan was; George stuffed it back into my throat.

“Thank you, Fenrir, you have not made an error on this day.”

“Leave me.”

.....

After hearing Diz’s plan, Verd approaches me and preaches about how the children need more Chrysos tomes to ensure they praise the right God. Kredo comes in to ask me if a delivery of wine was mislabelled and sent to me. Some part of me wishes it were. The day becomes a blur of

bureaucracy and eye rolling, with the secret of George's disapproval still weighing on my shoulders.

The sun falls down the horizon by the time Fox enters the council chambers.

"You're the only one I feel at ease with around here." I wipe the sweat off my forehead and sink into my chair.

"Because of my Beta family history?"

"No, not that. You best not feel that way."

"A joke, Fen. Your father was one of the good ones."

I switch on the fake fire and curl up beside it. "Not everyone agrees on that."

"Why do you feel at ease with me?"

"Do you remember the god-awful junkyard that me and those kids used to play in?"

"I don't recall," Fox says.

"It was that day, we were messing around with some of the scrap metal, you were there.

Those kids hounded you, berated you, I think they even threw some old screens at you."

"My memory gets fuzzy, so many Kwewu who think with their knuckles instead of their brains. Remind me."

"You yelled at them."

"Did I?"

"You told them to 'shove off', but they laughed at you. Anyway, some hundred-year-old Vend-a-GP got knocked out of place and was about to fall and crack my head open."

"Vend-a-GP: a drop of blood, a diagnosis and a prescription."

"You do remember?"

“Go on. You’re telling the story.”

“Those kids dispersed but you saved me. Puny little Fox in the shadows, they called you, yet you saved me from certain death.”

“Low chance you’d see me save you now. With all your strength, you don’t need a puny little shadow to protect you.” Fox laughs.

“I couldn’t out-fox you though.”

He claps my shoulder. “I’d bet on that.” He sits by the fire and holds his paws close to the heat. “Though, I must say, your taste in company hasn’t grown any better.”

“You mean Kredo? He’s a little feral, he liked the good old wolf tribe days,” I say.

“Kredo is... he’s straightforward. I mean Vice-President George.”

“I’m his war commander, I have to talk to him.”

“In secret? Without your war councillors? In his manse?” says Fox.

“How do you know about that?”

“People don’t take much notice of shadows.”

“Fox, stop talking in riddles. What’s your problem with George?”

“He’s not playing the game to win, he’s playing for his daughter’s life, and he doesn’t care about anything but being on the winning side. He knows we’re not the winning side. He’ll betray you for G.R.A.Z.I.A.,” says Fox.

“I haven’t asked him for anything,” I say.

“What was your meeting about?”

“Don’t you already know?”

“I’m not quite so talented to get into a G.R.A.Z.I.A. guarded mansion.” Fox holds my shoulder tight. “I don’t want anyone taking you for a fool. Those kids were the same, they took you there, they planned it, they wanted you gone. I heard them, that’s why I was waiting at the junkyard. George is the same. I’m here to protect you using my strengths. You have to trust me on this,” Fox warns.

I look into Fox’s bright eyes. “Thank you. I couldn’t be the commander if it weren’t for you.”

“And you won’t be for long if you don’t start listening to me.”

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ELLBRAY

**Chapter 11: Council Meeting**

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Roth messages me to come to the ground level of the Floating City, a place where my sharp claws mimic the metallic silver buildings while my soft fur contrasts against it. Ignoring the venomous stares, I find him outside his favourite Caffeine Converter. An area so public I half expect to be mugged and killed by a group of bandits 'acting alone'.

I sit in a pod chair leant forward against the table, cutting circulation to my arms and shoulders as I try to shove my body into something intended to cup human torsos. The server robot floats over to me, its square eyes lined orange and speaker stuffed with dust. "Would-you-like-to-order?" it asks, stunted and monotone.

I wave it away and run my claws along the red crosshatch table, caking them with dirt. All the other tables are empty, and the server bot has placed itself on charge. Walls painted tacky red, digi-clocks that still tick, signs of a standard ground level business in the 'booming' capital. A place unfit for a wealthy President who lives on the top floor of the highest building and rules from the tallest seat.

I spot Roth down the street, arms behind his back, taking slow careful strides, wrists and fingers barren of jewels. He salutes onlookers, shakes the hands of admirers, and kneels to talk to clone children at their eye-level. They love to cheer and wave at corruption, but the mere sight of a wet nose and protruding canine muzzle gets me more snarls than clan wolves in heat. After sharing painted smiles and hollow chuckles, Roth approaches me at the Caffeine Converter.

"It's important to see my people now and then. No-one can rule from a silver chair." He beams, flashing me dead white teeth. No blue sheen of a projection, my first sighting of his delicate

flesh. He sits in the pod chair, checks that his collar is still flatly ironed, and shuffles closer to the table. The server bot appears in seconds.

“Would-you-like-to-order?”

“A slow roast for me, please. Want one?”

I shake my head and intertwine my claws in front of my snout.

“Coming-right-uu-up-sir.” The robot chokes, its ancient coding falling apart number by number.

Roth grins and adjusts his tie. “When a President throws a few hundred credits in the direction of a lowly ground level business, the owner kicks out the regular rats and serves undiluted injectables for the day.” Roth places a translucent barrier on his chapped lips. “What do you expect a President might get in return?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer. “The businesses on the ground levels are covers for credit laundering. The earnings from illegal robot-human modifications, drug overdosers and the like. Things that can be ignored. For a price.” He leans back in his chair.

The robot server places the caffeine injectable awkwardly on the edge of the table. “Enjoy-your-slow-roast-sir.”

Roth saves it from falling to the floor and shoves it in his wrist vein. He inhales deeply and clicks his neck. “You ever had one of these with an overdoser? It’s like fifteen caffeine capsules in one hit.”

“Wolves don’t need drugs to heighten their senses,” I say, staring at his weak, exposed throat.

“My father told me he’d met a hundred junkies wasting away their lives here before the nanomachines regulated drug overdosing. Minds turned to mush, wishing they were better, or dead. Now there’s a high price for purchasing that kind of imperfection. My father would have me maimed

for my cooperation here.” Roth adjusts his pure gold G-shaped cufflinks. “The owner of this business is what I term a ‘keeper’.” He taps his fingers against the table one by one. Our eyes nail together. “In exchange for my credits and silence, this particular keeper ensures the crime stays in its place. If I get a whiff of crime on the second level or above, he’ll lose more than his business.” Roth ceases his finger tapping. Silence punctuated by the hum of the robot server’s processor fan doubling in speed. Roth’s not used to waiting. “A little lesson in politics for you. You have to keep even the little people scratching at your feet.”

My ears perk. Running. Cranking. Weapons, speed. Coming from the street. I jolt upright and throw the table to the side. Grab Roth by his collar and stand between him and the attacker. The man leaps forward into the Converter and empties three plasma bullets into my shoulder. The holes drool blood onto my white fur. A stinging pain like my tail being sliced off. I remain thick and still as a Boonshield. Spring off my human legs and close the gap between the assailant and myself. Pin him to the ground and drill my claw into his wrist. His grip loosens on the gun. My blood drips onto his neck. Without thought, I flip out my searing blade and press it against his chest, holding tense as it heats.

A hand grips my shoulder.

“Please, Ellbray. Don’t kill him. Loyal peons are so hard to find,” Roth says.

I let go of the assailant. He springs to his feet, rubs his wrist quickly and salutes.

“Sir President Roth, Sir,” he says.

“A test.” Roth pulls out a healing staple and clicks it three times against my wounds. “You’ll have to wash the blood off yourself.” Roth looks to the shivering, pale-faced peon. “Go on, give her your jacket.”

The man edges forward, handing it to me. I snatch it and growl.



"Off you go." Roth shoos the man and he scuttles off before I can wrap the jacket over my wounds. "You don't want me dead. But I still suspect an ulterior motive."

"I serve the Government. Always have, always will."

"Well, strictly, you only served my father. I asked my councillors; I like to call them the snakes of father's legacy. Though sometimes, actual snakes might be more useful. None of them recall you serving before Trudo."

"I serve your family."

"I do wonder how you ignore all the moves I've made against the Kwewu. Your people."

"Are they my people? Or just people like me?"

Roth takes a moment to scan my body. "Hmmm, you're an interesting dog, you. Come, let's have a chat with some of your colleagues."

So much for not calling me a dog.

Roth walks the streets for a while, waving, speaking to strangers, gifting the human-children candy capsules. After a time, he leads me into the G.R.A.Z.I.A. headquarters. The reception is sprawling and sparkles a projection blue. Branded with floating logos. The entry scanner, manned by four or five guards, checks DNA down to the skeletal structure to ensure clearance. It barks when it scans me. One hand from Roth stops the guards swarming. The floors are made of thick foggy glass. As you look up, the blurry feet of G.R.A.Z.I.A. employees shuffle across the offices. Roth winks at the receptionists. "Keep up the good work," he says. All eyes on him. He's back in his kingdom. The elevator we step into is carried by a long mechanical arm. The top floor is floating away from the building and made entirely of platinum. Some floors are moving between this building and the business centre. Connecting with each other almost as if they are one. The arm joins us with Roth's office.

I walk in to find Kubro, Mansyl, and Saed seated in the council room. What kind of group is this? A gathering of the rotten that run the city? I slide into a red velvet chair across from Kubro, who's staring wickedly at me. A man Trudo was loath to call upon is now sitting in his office. Mansyl and Saed both nod in unison, two disingenuous faces to match.

Kubro jumps in front of me, grinning from cheek to cheek.

"I'm so conflicted. A dog and a lady, do I open the door for you or use you as a doorstep?"

Mansyl interrupts. "Ignore that one. There is no divide between us and you. You at the shoulder of the President is great proof of that."

"There's no better PR than having an enemy at your side," Saed says.

"I thought I'd gather you here, my small council, to discuss a matter of great importance," Roth says. "Mansyl, Saed, do explain."

Mansyl sits forward and links his hands together. He speaks in a low voice. "Our visit to the city has illuminated a problem."

Saed chimes in. "A city so tense we nearly didn't make it back."

"Yes, the mere presence of Kwewu in the capital disturbs many humans," Mansyl says.

Saed nods. "We have given our recommendation to Roth, and he has agreed."

Roth smirks and licks his lips. "I always listen to my PR advisers; they spin the webs I want."

"Get on with it, clowns. What's the recommendation?" Kubro asks.

"A curfew of sorts. A timeframe when the Kwewu can go out and do their errands, the humans assured they are safe from the radiation and tension. Between 10am and 1pm, Kwewu are free to roam the streets. Otherwise, they are advised to stay in their homes," Mansyl states with a cheery tone.

"And if they don't abide?" Kubro slouches in his chair and crosses his thick arms.

"G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldiers will be patrolling the street." Roth chuckles.

"Strictly no violence," Saed adds. "Just escorts to their homes."

"And what does the mutt think of all this?" Kubro turns to me.

"You'd be wise to hold your tongue around this particular mutt, I'm betting she could take you in a fight."

"The curfew is fair," I say, biting my tongue. I'll play the game. Stay close to the President. Hold my questions.

"This is why you hired her. Or should I say re-hired her? She nods and agrees with you like a good dog should." Kubro howls at his own joke.

"And what do you do?" I say.

"Oh, a little bit of this and that. I excel at many things." He winks.

"You know, this one could use a muzzle."

"If you want me to play dog, I'd be happy to." He raises an eyebrow.

Roth guffaws. "Don't you love this dynamic! Now this is a council meeting."

"It's a perfect team, Sir," says Mansyl.

"You have spectacular taste in employees," says Saed.

"Council dismissed." Roth leans back in his chair. "Oh, Ellbray, I need to talk to you alone."

The council disperses. Mansyl and Saed scuttle off together and Kubro clicks his tongue at me and exits the room.

“My... oh, what would you call her? My employee that’s having my child, she’s getting a tad restless and lonesome without her laboratory. Would you mind keeping her company?” Roth spins one of the rings on his finger. “Perhaps placate her with an experiment or two?”

“Wouldn’t my ‘toxic radiation’ be risking your precious offspring?”

“Oh,” he replies flippantly. “I’m sure one Kwewu won’t hurt. Now, will you go?”

I nod. The woman closest to Roth must know the truth.

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BETH

**Chapter 12: Ultrasound**

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The windows shudder as the sliding door sighs open. Dr Henley crumbles through, fumbles with his magnoscope and slides over to me. I stay propped against the wall with the finest, fullest pillows, clutching my swollen stomach. Henley shoves his cold hands against my wrist, his watch monitor bleeps. Henley liked to follow procedure back in my lab. He'd tell Roth whatever Roth wanted to hear for whichever mood he was in – not that Henley could read Roth's mood even if he had a colour chart for his ugly face. Henley points to my stomach. I flip back a small portion of my shirt and leave my hands resting in place.

"Nausea? Cramps?" he asks.

"No."

He slides the magnoscope along my stomach in circular motions. Nudges my hands aside to feel the top of the bump.

"Strong heartbeat. Good blood flow. Adequate amniotic fluid." Henley pricks my finger and scoops some blood into the recess in his watch. It ticks and dings. "No birth defects or glaring genetic issues. Surprisingly." He grumbles under his breath.

"Get on with it." It's okay, my child. His cold hands will be gone soon.

A short, sharp pain shoots through my lower stomach. He removes the tiny needle and discards it without blinking.

"What the hell are you doing?" I recoil.

"Live feed of your womb. Roth wants it streamed to the public."

They'll see my baby's heart beat before I do.

He taps his glasses and scans my body. "Foetus is in the correct position. Hmmm... slow growth, at least three weeks behind according to record."

"According to record? Can't you think for yourself, Henley?"

"Normal human gestation is between 38 and 42 weeks. You're set for 45 weeks."

"Yes, the only real baby on Cetera wants to stay inside a little longer. I can't blame her."

"Too early for gender, 60% chance of male but still unconfirmed."

"Sometimes you just know."

"Mother's intuition? Never had you for a sap."

"I'm a scientist. A scientist who knows more about pregnancy than you ever will."

"Your melatonin is low, use the sleep booth."

"Roth doesn't control my sleep. I'll stay awake all night if I want."

Henley rolls his eyes. "Use it, or I'll have to report back." He pulls his magnoscope away and I grab his wrist. Hard.

"Or maybe I could report back what I know about you." I tighten my grip.

"And what might that be?" Henley rips his arm away, stands and smirks down at me from his five feet.

"I know what you did to Trudo and Ren, and where Roth can find the trail of proof."

Henley's smirk drops and his eyes dilate like a wolf's in a Boonlight. "Impossible. You're bluffing."

“Want to try me? What do you suppose Roth would do to you? Murder you outright? Kill your wife or daughter before they expire? Maybe he’d torture them in front of you. Or you in front of them.”

“And what will you do, stuck in here like a prisoner?”

I run my fingers along the duvet. “You surely know that Roth pays me many visits.” I shove Henley away and roll off the side of the bed. He follows me with his eyes as I come face-to-face with him. I bend down to his eye level. “If you do me a favour, I might forget to tell him what I know about you.”

“A favour?” Henley recoils.

“A gesture of good faith. Something to keep my words getting away from me.”

“What is it?” Henley blurts out.

“A small favour, nothing too outrageous. Something a great doctor such as yourself should easily be able to accomplish.”

“Spit it out!”

I smile. “All I want you to do, doctor, is to support my scientific opinion when I present it to Roth.”

“Support your... scientific opinion?”

“That’s right. Whatever it may be. If I tell him it is so, you agree. Get it?”

“And how do I know you won’t tell him what happened anyway?”

“Because I’m going to need you to lie for me more than once.”

“And when you’re done with me? You’ll tell him anyway?”

“When I’m done with you, Henley, I’ll be done with Roth too.” I smirk.

Henley nods. "Whatever your theory, I support it."

"You'll nod and prove it with as much false data as you have to input."

"My data will reflect your theory."

"When the time comes, you'll know what to do, and if you parrot my truth, I won't parrot yours."

"Done."

"Good, now shoo and tell him the good news about his growing foetus."

Dr Henley nods and scuffles to the door.

"Oh, and pass on a message to my sister Ribbon at the Underground Lab. Tell her I'll be back soon."

Henley nods and rushes through the sliding door, banging his elbows into it on the way out.

Even simple people have deadly secrets, but secrets aren't the problem. It's who's keeping them. My secrets will be between you and me. I rub my belly. We'll trust no-one but each other.



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LILLY

**Chapter 13: Midnight Wandering**

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It's late and Dad wants me tucked into bed, but the lights in his wing are shining bright like fireflies in my favourite movie, *Green Wings*. It's about a little girl who finds a bunch of mean ghosts in her attic and brings them back into the living world as fireflies.

I hear crashing footsteps made by ugly G.R.A.Z.I.A. boots and deep voices grumbling through the walls. Chair legs scraping our wood floors. Mamma would have been furious. I scratched her hand-crafted teak cabinet once and she never forgave me. I have to know what Dad is up to. Verne is wrong, knowing is always better. I crawl down the marble hallway like a mouse. The door to Dad's office is slightly open. I peek my head in and listen.

Dad speaks as quiet as when he tells me bedtime stories. "A shame the commander ruined my birthday, I'd planned to get riotously drunk that night."

Me and Dad didn't get to spend much time together on his birthday. That Mr Fenrir could have waited. Dad didn't get to see the praying mantis with me in the Earth room. We spoke to the skies together and wished he'd stop working so much.

"We can always do it tonight, Sir," Verne says, all adult-like.

"You think Knell would mind? He's always been an alcohol enthusiast, but business is better done with clear heads."

Knell is the creep from Red Island, one of the people in charge. Why would Dad want to do business with him?

Verne pulls out his gun from his belt and looks inside it. "I'm not sure, Sir."

Dad rummages through his wine cabinet. "Was Knell a fan of red or white wine?"

"Knell is unpredictable." Verne's leg twitches. He can't keep still, and his forehead looks sweaty, like when he goes for a run. "Apologies, that was too forward of me."

"If Roth finds out, he'll decorate the G.R.A.Z.I.A. building with my head, and yours too." Dad gulps. "Lilly and Khalid's wouldn't be far behind."

Decorate the capital with our heads? Mine will look awesome but I don't think Khalid would like that.

"How do you plan on sneaking Knell into Vivé, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I have an underground escape tunnel by the shoreline with the submarine at the end. Leads right to a Boonshielded door at the back of the manse."

Whoa, Dad has a secret tunnel! I have to see it, maybe there are fireflies in there. They like it in dark places, so they can light them up and make them twinkle. If it leads to the ocean, then the fireflies can listen to the waves smash against the rocks. If fireflies existed, they'd really like that.

"Sir," Verne rips off his G.R.A.Z.I.A. neck tags and puts them down without knotting the chain, "I work for you, and you alone."

"Boy," he slaps his hand on Verne's shoulder. "I trust you more than half the goons around here. Hell, I bet most of the Kwewu down there wish me dead."

"That's not true, Sir, the commander respects you."

"After our meeting, I'm not so sure. Now give me that whiskey, I need to be buzzed for this."

Verne rushes to the bottle and pours Dad a drink. Dad should listen to Verne, he knows everything about the wolfs. He used to take me down to the plaza when I was little and teach me about their noses and whiskers and ears. They can smell and hear and feel much stronger than we can. And if that's true, then I'm sure they know that Dad is on their side.

“And one for you too?” says Dad, holding out the bottle.

“Are you sure, Sir?”

“What did I tell you about all that Sir stuff?”

“Not to call you that.” Verne takes the bottle and pours himself a big drink.

Dad gulps back the entire glass and pours another one. Two knocks make Verne and Dad stiff as porcupines. Dad wipes his mouth and messes with his tie.

“I trust you, Verne, but for your sake, it’s better you don’t hear this.”

Verne hugs his gun tighter than he hugs me. “But Sir!”

The other door to Dad’s office opens, the one Khalid told me never to tell Mamma or anyone else about.

“What did I tell you?”

Verne is coming my way. I scurry down the hallway and hide in the kitchen for a few minutes. There are wet rings on the counter-top and empty capsule packets everywhere. I can’t wait till all the soldiers go and be messy in their own homes.

When I get back to the room, I spot the man with the black and gold robe and the owl patched on to it. He seems even taller than he was on the beach and now I can see his dark black hair.

“Knell, I’m glad you came.” Dad shakes Knell’s hand.

“Already poured me a glass of whiskey! What a welcome.” Knell’s face lights up and he takes a seat behind the drink.

His face is sharp like glass and when he smiles you can see all his teeth. He smiles a lot but it’s not like Verne or Dad, and I’ve only ever seen him after bedtime.

Dad pulls the red bottle out of his cabinet. "Or did you want a glass of red?"

"The first sip is always the best. Oh, yes, I'll take the wine too."

Something touches my shoulder and my heart jumps out of my nightie. Khalid grins.

"What're you doing here?" he whispers.

"I want to see what Dad's doing."

Khalid has rings around his eyes and cuts on his cheek. A blue mark on his head. He's wearing daytime clothes and has a bottle of awake capsules with him. "You shouldn't be listening in; this is adult stuff."

"Then why are you here!" I poke my tongue out. "Did you go pick fights again?"

"Shh, before they hear us, sis." He shoves four capsules in his mouth. "Fighting's good practice for war."

"You'll never get to sleep after all those."

"Wasn't planning to," he says.

When I look back to Dad and Knell, they've already finished both their drinks and are pouring more. Dad's undone the top button on his collar. Knell's plonked his sandy shoes on Dad's desk. That's an antique, Dad told me, wood that no longer grows on Cetera, and he's letting it get dirty.

"Any surveillance?" Knell laughs. "I wouldn't want my tipsy, secretive conversations with enemy leaders recorded."

"I assure you, this is a private conversation," says Dad.

"Tch." Khalid pushes me back, so I don't lean too far into Dad's office. "Very private."

Knell looks around the room and puts his hands behind his head, lounging on Dad's chair. He stares at the G.R.A.Z.I.A. awards on glass display. "Voted best Vice-President by the people." He slides his curly hair behind his ears. "Cleanest city in the West. Winner of the economic alliance. Patting your own back?"

Dad did so many amazing things, he deserves to pat himself on the back.

"If Roth gives them and I don't display them..." Dad stops talking and shakes his head. "Let's get on track. The Kwewu army plans to garrison the East. A move that is sure to land me in hot water with the aforementioned."

"Wolves are always fascinating to negotiate with. Are you going to stop them?"

"Have you tried stopping an army of wolves?"

"I have more experience fending off men at the bar." Knell giggles. "I've travelled such a way; can't we relax the war-talk a moment?"

"I don't have time. I'll send you a coded projection and that's your signal to move your army to East Cape. The Capital attacks and your precious Lord Kabel swoops in to save you."

"Khalid." I tug on his sleeve. "They're going where Meri lives, are they going to do something bad to her home?"

He pulls away and I fall over. "You and that wolf-woman, she was your mother's friend, not yours."

I feel it in my tummy. Like the day Mamma went to the stars. Or when I eat too many candy capsules. I don't want Meri to get hurt. She lives in East Cape and she's nice to me. Dad and his friend can talk all night if they want, I'm going to find the wolfs.

"Get back here," says Khalid.

"I'm going to stop the wolfs from hurting Meri."

"Ugh." Khalid pinches my arm and pulls me back. "Like you could do anything."

Knell makes shapes with his arm like a caterpillar. "I'm like a calm breeze, grass nodding in the wind. The one you're sure precedes the storm, but never does."

"You're not going to help me?" says Dad.

"I never said that."

I wriggle close to Khalid. "Why does Dad always talk to this guy?" I whisper. "He's so annoying."

"For once, I agree with you," says Khalid.

Dad rubs his eyes and points to the secret door. "Conversations with you always go around in circles. If you don't want to talk, leave."

"No-one ever suspects the breeze. Creaking your doors. Billowing the curtains. But it can do damage in silent bursts, if given the right house," says Knell.

"You want something from me?"

"A few of your snakes slithered onto my shore, hissing about a certain G.R.A.Z.I.A. weapon. Perked my interest."

"Nothing to do with me," says Dad.

"Well, I guess this war of yours is nothing to do with me." Knell heads towards the exit.

"Hang on." Dad stops him, almost spilling his glass. "I know where it's held."

"Oh, so do I, the lab hidden under G.R.A.Z.I.A.'s personal scrapheap. Fitting really. Alas, the weapon has escaped."

“How do you know about the lab? And the weapon for that matter?”

“There are plenty of spiders willing to weave a few webs,” says Knell. “G.R.A.Z.I.A. keep some strange things down there.”

I’ve seen spiders before, not real ones. They’re kinda fluffy. They have long legs, just like Knell! They can crawl upside-down and make sticky threads. I wonder if Knell does that too?

Dad sighs and clicks his neck. He only does that when he’s about to burst. “If you wish to remain a breeze, having G.R.A.Z.I.A.’s weapon in your hands is not the way.”

“Sometimes the breeze needs to enlist a few tornadoes. Get me the weapon and I’m yours.” Knell makes a kissy face.

“I’ll clear East Cape. If you hold it for me, the weapon is yours,” says Dad.

“G.R.A.Z.I.A.-on-G.R.A.Z.I.A. action. How exhilarating.” Knell wipes the dirt off Dad’s desk and leans in real close. “You’ll clear Roth’s sentries, androids, automated turrets and first rank soldiers, and little old me will walk in with mine and East Cape becomes Red Island’s Cape. Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“And how does a Vice-President trapped in his own city plan to do that?”

“That part of the plan is between me and myself,” Dad says. “But I will destroy G.R.A.Z.I.A.”

My feet tingle and my throat gets really dry, like when I haven’t had any water capsules all day. “Destroy G.R.A.Z.I.A.,” I whisper to Khalid. “Why would Dad do that?”

“Father could tell you the clouds shit gold and you’d believe him,” he sighs.

Knell slams down his glass, putting a ring on the table. “Ahh, you’re another spider. Don’t get caught in your own web.”

“You have to make sacrifices to win wars, and I’m not about to lose,” says Dad.

What war is Dad talking about?

Khalid leans against the door. "Father's finally becoming a man."

What are they all talking about?

"I have one more favour to ask," says Dad.

"I'm listening," says Knell.

"You feed Lord Kabel information about President Roth, don't you?"

Knell puts his hands up. "Couldn't say."

Dad puts the caps on his bottles. "You might want to feed Lord Kabel some information about the attack. Tell her it's her chance to take the Capital."

"The other council members might want to get wind of this plan. Send the signal and whatever happens, happens," says Knell.

"You need to commit to this plan now." Dad gets that angry, scrunchy look on his face. "Or Red Island goes down with G.R.A.Z.I.A."

"The deal's a bit sour for my taste." Knell licks his lips. "I'm easy won with sweetness."

"You can have the Floating City. I'll remain in Vivé."

"You mean take back our homeland?" Knell says. "Your plan reeks of my people's demise."

"Wars breed death, you have to accept that," Dad says. "But your people won't be the ones dying. Neutrality is how you lose, pick the right side and win."

"You drive a hard bargain, but Kabel's been itching to kill some G.R.A.Z.I.A. dogs," says Knell.

"It's war, then."

I back away from the door down the hall. Khalid whips after me.



"You speak nothing of this." He grips me before I can reach my room. Putting red fingerprint marks on my arms. "Not even to Verne."

"Let go of me!"

"Quiet, before Father hears you."

"I'll scream! Let go, you bully!"

Khalid drags me into my room and throws me onto my bed. "Scream and George will know you were listening to him. You'll be in big trouble then."

"You were there too!"

"Promise you won't tell anyone what you heard tonight."

"Why was Dad talking that way? I don't like it."

"George talks one way to you and a different way to everyone else. You're his little treasure."

"Why does he speak differently to me?"

"Because." Khalid moves closer to me and frowns. "You look like his dead wife and he has to protect you."

"Not true!"

"Go to sleep. And pretend like you didn't hear anything, otherwise I'll cut Dolly's head off."

I clutch Dolly to my chest. "You wouldn't."

"I would."

"Go away!" I throw my bearded frog toy at him. It misses.

Khalid gives me his evil-eye, then silently shuts the door. I switch my fish nightlight on and watch the yellow seahorse curl its tail around a bigger red one. They're a happy family, behind the plastic, away from all the wolfs and spiders and snakes. One thing Dad said keeps repeating in my head and it makes my tummy gurgle. He said that wars breed death. The only death I've seen was Mamma's, and it hurt Dad really bad. But then he told Knell that he has to accept death. As if sometimes people dying is okay. Dad doesn't really think that, does he? I close my eyes and bury my head in my frilly, pink pillow. No, Dad was just saying that to impress the mean owl-man, he'd never be so cruel.

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**BETH**

**Chapter 14: The Kwewu Study**

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I'm rigid. Boiling. I barely turn to acknowledge the two who've stormed into my room unannounced – the President and a dog. I lean into the large window, staring at the people below and my own reflection in the glass.

"My father always taught me to treat my wife with great respect and honour. To worship her like a goddess."

"Ahh, so you've blessed me with this heavenly prison in the sky?" I snarl.

"On the other hand, he betrayed her with some half-wolf whore and then my dog-brother popped out of her cunt, so I take his advice with a pinch of salt."

The wolf standing at his side twitches at Roth's words. "What'd you bring me? Your father's leftovers?"

"I've heard you're restless," says Roth. "I'll not have you talking to your insidious sister, but you can continue your Kwewu studies on Ellbray. Wouldn't want my son getting bored in there." He winks. "Or your brilliant mind getting rusty."

The Kwewu removes her hood.

"White fur, rare. Young. How old are you, 50?" I say.

"52," Ellbray answers.

"Anyway, I have work to do. Enjoy, my dear." Roth's projection fades away.

"You're no projection." I touch her soft fur. "And you're happy to be an experiment? After what he's done to your people?"

"I served Trudo, and I serve Roth."

"I saw you, you know, in the crowd at the inaugural speech. Why were you hiding?"

"I wasn't sure whether I wanted Roth to find me."

"And his speech did it for you?"

Ellbray stares at me blankly.

"Or was it mine?"

Ellbray nods.

"Do you want to know what's happened to me since that speech?" I ask, walking over to the window. "I've been stuck in this room with a fake skyline. Cut off from all communications." I point to the blue skies and puffy clouds outside. "A capsule forced down my throat, so I am permanently unable to teleport." I edge closer to the wolf and look into her crystalline eyes. Placing my hands around her wrists. "He's trapped me here with no voice." I grab her tighter. "Until you came. You have to help me, Ellbray. You're the only one who can."

Ellbray backs away, releasing herself from my grip. "You help me, and I'll help you."

I smile at the wolf. "Do me one favour and I'll be in debt to you."

"Go on."

"Get me out of here long enough to radio-contact Ribbon. My sister will help free me from this prison," I plead.

Ellbray nods and moves towards the door. "I'll think about it," she says.

I take this chance to rest, as Henley instructed. The night takes me into my dreams. My body contorts, my spine twists and cracks. Stomach warbles and screeches. A tiny hand presses against my flesh.

*He'll kill you. You know that.*

A voice that sounds far away and inside me. Deep, mocking. Crunches with every syllable.

I try to respond but my throat is dry. "Roth can try."

*Not Roth*, the voice echoes.

The baby's hand bursts through my skin. Blood flows out from the hole, drooling onto my white clothes. The other hand bursts through. Two bloodied, tiny hands stick out from my womb. Rip through my organs and muscles to be rid of me. A vessel for its growth. What the world always sees in us.

*Your baby will kill everyone.*

"She'll never hurt me. I'm her mother."

*Children hurt their mothers most of all.*

My heart races as more blood spills from my womb. It turns black and my skin wilts away like the plants I've killed. My veins are empty. The colour fades from my eyes. And then... and then, the baby...

I wake up. My body soaked in sweat. I rip up my shirt and see two hand-shaped, yellow bruises on my swollen stomach. I rub the area, it's tender and sore. "Hah." I smirk and press on my belly. "You're already strong!"

Ellbray opens the door. She rushes over to me and presses her claw against my forehead. She must smell something in the air or feel the heat coming from me. "You have a fever." She sees the bruises on my stomach and her eyes widen. "What happened?"

"Get the coolant." I point to the side table next to the bed.

Ellbray rummages through the drawer and pulls out a bluish-white syringe. She slowly injects it into my ear.

"Fevers are common during pregnancy. When I—" Ellbray pauses. "When my mother was pregnant, she had them all the time."

"I know that." I throw off my wet covers and rip off the soaking sheets. "I'm a scientist. Look, we're running out of time. Get me out of here. Just for a few minutes."

Ellbray pulls me out in the dead of night. I can't see the G.R.A.Z.I.A. headquarters to get my bearings. We dart blind through ground level alleys. I bring the pen with me, the one Mitch had given me, and hope to all the Gods that ever existed, even the God Wolf, that Ribbon answers the radio. I click the pen to press it on and some static comes through.

"Ribbon, if you're there, I need you."

The static continues, solid and unbroken for at least a minute. Ellbray's eyes shine in the moonlight. She shuffles impatiently.

"Ribbon, please."

The static stops. "What do you want?"

Thank God. Relief washes over me, "Ribbon, I need you to supply Henley with a batch of test results and the pre-rendered videos stored in my lab. The code is Obscura. You need to get these to him as soon as possible and as discreetly as possible. No one else is to know what you've given him, and make sure he won't tell anyone."

"What's in it for me?"

"Don't play with me. I know you're sinking your claws into Mitch as we speak. The last thing you want is me coming back to the lab and ruining your little fantasy. I assure you, if Roth kills me, and Mitch finds out it's your fault, he won't be in the mood to see you for a century or two."

“And how would he ever find out it was me, darling sister?”

“He gave me this radio, and I will make sure he knows, even if it takes my last breath to tell him.”

“Relax, sis, I wouldn’t let you die. It’s much more fun when you’re alive. What’s winning without a little competition? I’ll get the data to Fenley or whatever his name is, don’t you worry.”

“Dr Henley!”

The transmission returns to static.

Ellbray turns away swiftly when I notice her staring at me. “We’re not exactly the closest twins on Cetera, but she’ll do as she says.”

Ellbray doesn’t say another word, but grabs my arm and takes me back to the room.

I lie on the bed and rub Dragon’s lotion on my stomach. A gift from Red Island. Superstitious, but the lotion is soft and delightful. Ellbray stares at my stretched stomach.

“It’s strange,” I say. “When she moves, I remember I have a life inside me.”

“There’s nothing better,” Ellbray says.

“Oh?” I stare at her.

“The warm heartbeat next to yours. There’s no feeling like it.”

“What happened?” I say.

Ellbray stares at her feet, eyes glazed and distant.

“She’s in there. Already living.” Speaking to me in ways I’d never imagined. “If someone took her away. If she disappeared. She’d leave a hole inside me so big I’d crumble into nothingness,” I say.

“My—he was killed...” She places her paw gently against my stomach. “So, you think it’s a girl?”

“It will be.” I put my hand over hers. “You’ve lost something precious to you, yet you stand here, right-hand for G.R.A.Z.I.A., as it takes more away from you? From the Kwewu?”

“Sometimes we have to follow the powerful to get back our own power.” Ellbray pauses. “You of all people should understand that.”

I smile. “You’d do anything to get back what was taken from you?”

Ellbray shakes her head. “Nothing can bring it back.” Her fists tighten. “But I have to find out why.”

“The why is almost as important as the who.” I look at Ellbray’s snout, pointed ears, white fur, her almond-shaped eyes, her crooked whiskers. Attributes my body will never have. Yet, our brains are both made of the same tissue, matter, electricity, and blood. Fuelled by an ember left hot for too many years. Still capable of igniting. “If our paths are heading in the same direction, I see no reason to treat you like my subject. I have something for you. A gift to show you what we can do if we work together. I’ll prepare it tomorrow, but in the meantime, make sure you get a good night’s rest.”

My sleep that night quickly devolves into a feverish dream-mare; images of floating circles duplicate and take over my body.

The faraway voice echoes in my head.

*It will destroy you.*

*You know.*

*But that’s ok.*



*That's what it was born to do.*

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**SKAR**

**Chapter 15: The Curfew**

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I'm awoken from a deep sleep when Luc snorts, flops out of bed and rams through our bedroom door. The gust from the aftermath irritates my whiskers. I land two feet on our faded blue carpet and turn the projection window on. Flicking through the different options, 'beach sunrise', 'epic skyline' and 'mossy forest', I settle for a live feed of the outside world. An image of the other concrete house just inches away and the soft light produced by the Boonshield. Another mild, temperate day.

"I wanna go outside the Boonshield one day!" says Luc. He's standing in the doorway, hover skates flung over his shoulder.

"No, you don't." I walk over to him and snatch away the skates.

"Oi," Luc whines. "Give them back."

I dangle the skates just out of his reach. He springs up and down trying to snatch them back.

"Imagine the hottest setting on the shower and double it. That's what it'd be like. Your fur would fall out!"

The creaks of Granma's favourite chair draw me to the lounge, but she's just left it on auto-rock. I check the kitchen: one empty cup with dried lipstick stains on the rim, displaced from the dish rack. I peek inside her room. She's curled up on the edge of her bed, no blanket, no pillow, still fully dressed.

"Did she collapse again?"

Luc purses his lips. "Shh." He grabs the skates off me. "She's sleeping."

I'll buy us a higher-level plot and a floating house. They'll have better medicine and doctors there that can help her.

I follow Luc to the lounge where he's placed a hover skate on each foot and is tinkering with the settings. "It's past curfew, you can't go outside."

"I don't care about the curfew. G.R.A.Z.I.A.'s a bunch of dummies too rich to smell their own bullshit. That's what Granma says."

"You might get into trouble!" I grab one of the boots and fight Luc for it. It slips off and hurtles across the room, narrowly missing Granma's war medals. "It's against the rules."

"You and your dumb rules." Luc pulls off the other boot and flashes me his tongue. "Chicken!"

"Fine, go then for all I care." I cross my arms in a huff. The sound of the front door slamming shut shocks my heart. "Luc!"

I run out the door but he's already halfway down our street. I dodge humans and dart around the armoured guards stationed along the street. Humans cross to the other side of the road as I get near. I keep steady focus on Luc, blanking out anything else. Sprint. Breathe. Sharp turn. Halt. Two shadows appear in front of us. Luc crashes into one, and I the other. It's the creepy twins again.

"We meet again. I am Mansyl," he says.

"And I am Saed. You'd be wise to remember our names should any trouble befall you," the other says.

"What are you two doing out past curfew?" Mansyl curls his neck, his black bulging eyes looking down into mine.

"Yes, we were quite generous on the first few days. No punishment at all, just a friendly G.R.A.Z.I.A. escort home." Saed kneels and plants two rigid fingers on Luc's forehead and pushes him back.

"Yes, we *were* quite generous."

"M-my little brother just ran out of the house. I'm sorry, I was bringing him back." I fall to my knees. "I swear he meant no harm."

"Oh really? Quite a story, mutt," comes another voice from beside us. Two G.R.A.Z.I.A. guard's box us in between the twins and the building behind.

"Down to the prison we go." The guard chews at something brown and rotten, staining his teeth. "See this here, boy. It's a brain destimulator. One zap," he waves it in front of me, "and your brain goes bye-bye for the next hour."

The other guard cackles. "Shame it's not a deadly weapon. The President prefers spare labourers over corpses."

He rips my arms behind my back, almost popping them out of each socket. Electric handcuffs clutch my wrists, wrapping them together in an unbreakable knot.

"It's just a misunderstanding," I protest.

"Don't worry, we shall escort your little brother home." Mansyl smirks.

They hold Luc's hands and lead him toward our house. Do they know where we live? Will they actually take him home?

"Wait, wait! Please sir, it wasn't Skar's fault, it was all mine," says Luc.

"It's okay." They ram the tail end of a gun into the small of my back. "Go home, Luc."

"Skar!" Luc yells through tears.

They shove me through the streets, making my arrest a show for the stray humans wandering by. Grinning smugly and receiving smiles in return. We arrive at an unmarked building with no windows. They drag me through a door almost too small for my wolf torso to fit. Throw me down a corridor of dark cells. On one side of mine, a Kwewu meditates with legs crossed, eyes closed, and ears perked. On the other side, a Kwewu lies splayed out on the concrete bed sharpening her claws.

“What you in for? Yer just a kid.”

“I was just getting my brother. He ran outside.” I wet my dry mouth. “What about you?”

“Hard to follow a curfew when you live on the streets.”

The cell is cold stone. It smells of mouldy fur licked to death with a rotten mouth. My arms and legs shudder as if my muscles have disappeared. Tail between my legs, I pat down the raised fur and watch it catch my tears. I cry until I run out of energy. My nose is so blocked it hides the stench. Will I get to go home and sleep in my own bed? Will I see Luc and Granma again?

I can’t tell if I’ve slept through the night because the light is so dim. My stomach rumbles. By this time of day, Granma would already have given me fifteen credits to get us breakfast capsules. The floor underneath my waste sink is wet. Dirty water leaks from the cracked joins.

“Excellent,” says the man in the other cell, who had been meditating when I arrived. “That’ll draw in the roaches.” He rubs his hands together and laps at his lips. “Haven’t had me a meal in days.” He shoots me a wicked glare. “They’re mine, I saw them first.” He flops on the ground, reaches through my cell bar and snatches a scuttling cockroach. He crunches on it, its two feelers halfway out his mouth.

“He ate roaches out there too,” says the woman in the other cell.

“Good protein.” He swallows the insect. “Don’t turn your nose up at it. The fancy wolves died with the clans.”

“What have we here?” A deep voice rumbles through the prison. It stirs up barking wolves. A guard I haven’t seen before unlocks my cell. “This isn’t the place for making friends.” He enters my cell. “You hungry, boy?”

“Y-Yes... I-I’ve been here for a day, sir, I’m starving.”

“A whole day?” The guard smiles and ruffles through his belt of weapons. My heart sinks. I back away into the corner, touching the filth on the floor.

The guard clicks his tongue. “I wasn’t going to hurt you.” He pulls out a small capsule and places it on the edge of my bed. “I’m sure they’ll set you free soon.”

The guard leaves and locks me back in. He divvies out capsules to the others. I’ve done nothing wrong. Why won’t they set me free? “Can you check on my brother?” I blurt out.

The guard stops in his tracks. “I’m not in the habit of doing favours.” He pauses. “Your brother in here too?”

“No. Mansyl and Saed promised they’d take him home, but I don’t trust them. I just want to know he’s safe.”

“Those creeps? Who knows what they’re up to, but I’m not getting involved. Sorry, kid.” The guard frowns and leaves the prison.

I eat the capsule — flavourless, but my stomach fills. With closed eyes, I listen to the others. There are at least fifty in here. By the smell of them, some have suffered much longer than others.

“Think about your loved ones or don’t think about them. It hurts both ways, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” I say. “I don’t like being far away from my brother.”

A radio crackles on, I can't see where it's coming from. "Mornin' dogs. Today you get to try something extra special. Our Frenzy gas should be a blast. Let's see if we can get you to kill each other."

Thick waves release from the ceiling in all directions. I hold my breath but eventually inhale some of it. It stings as it inflates my lungs. Manic growls and deep, aggressive barks shatter my eardrums. The roach-eater's eyes look wild and red. He crushes his body against the bars so hard both shoulders dislocate. He escapes. His eyes narrow in on the woman next to me, whose teeth are bared and sharp. He smashes through her cell and the two dig their claws into each other. Blood splatters and flies onto my bed and spritzes onto my fur. I shuffle back in my cage, trying to get as far as I can from them. They tear at each other's throats, opening wounds and pulling off skin with fur still attached. A piece lands in front of me. My paws and feet go numb. I'm crying again. My chest heaves up and down. Granma will rescue me, Granma will find me, it'll all be okay, Luc's fine, everything's fine. This is all a dream. My eyes sew themselves shut.

I awaken, startled, and lunge into my bed. Trembling violently. The cells next to me are empty and clean of blood stains. The nice guard with the capsule stares at me from the woman's cell. "A horrible waste." He looks down at the ground. "What an awful experiment."

He opens my cell and holds his hand out to me. I'm too scared to take it.

"Their conclusion? The gas doesn't work on all Kwewu. Not that it's dangerous or immoral, just that it doesn't work quite how they wanted it to." He sits on the end of my bed. I curl away from him. "I'm going to take you home now."

What if he beats me or takes me somewhere worse?

"We don't have much time, kid." He holds out his hand to me again.

I wipe away my tears and take it this time. We pass numerous empty cells. Where are the other fifty of us? Did they all die last night?

The guard sneaks me through an emergency exit and pulls me into the light of the outside. It burns my eyes. "It's before curfew, but I'll escort you home to be safe."

He does as promised and takes me home. "Here," he says, petting down my mane. "Don't want to look scruffy for your family."

I turn away from the guard and put my hand on the door handle. "Why did you help me?"

The guard shrugs and puts his hands in his pockets. "It felt like the right thing to do."

When I walk into the house, Granma comes running. She squeezes me in a tight hug and then hits me over the head.

"What were you thinkin' boy!"

"I had to get Luc back."

Luc peeks out from behind Granma's skirt.

"You didn't tell it like that, Luc," she says.

I grimace. "Luc ran out the bloody door, Granma, I had to go get him."

Granma squeezes Luc tight. "Fight the big wigs!" she yells. "I used to do that in the clan wars. You're a brave boy, Luc."

Luc smirks and whips his tongue out at me.

I nearly fall to the floor. "He broke the law and got me imprisoned!"

"Well ya can't just listen to whatever people tell you just because it's the law. What if the law said you had to burn down our house, would ya do it?"

"Well, no, but—"

"He's exercising his right to protest, eh Luc?"



“Yeah!” Luc pumps his fist.

“You’re both crazy. No wonder Luc never listens.” I’m too tired to argue. “It was dark in those cells. Quiet and loud at the same time. I think the prisoners in there killed each other... they were all Kwewu.”

Granma pulls me into a tight hug. “I’m sorry, Skar. You’re a brave and gentle boy.” She runs her hands through my mane. I cry into her shoulder.

“I shoulda broke those G.R.A.Z.I.A. twigs in half and got you outta that stinkin’ jail.”

Luc runs over and wraps himself around my leg. “Me too. I’m sorry I got you in trouble. I love you.”

We stay that way for minutes. The warmth of Granma and Luc slows my racing heart and soothes the lump in my throat.

“Come on.” Granma lets go and leads me to the couch. She boils me and Luc a piping hot insta-brew and relaxes into her armchair. She turns it on ‘slow rock’. “Let me tell you a story to get your minds offa what happened.”

“Granma, can you tell us about the clan wars?” Luc spills a bit of his tea as he jumps on the rug at Granma’s feet, raring for one of her classic stories.

“Why, of course.” Granma lights up. “Back in the day, there were Alpha and Beta wolves. Now, at first that meant Alphas were the leaders and Betas were the pack wolves. However, Alphas believed they were better than Beta wolves. It got to the point where the Betas were put in collars and traipsed around on leashes. They sat at the edge of their Alphas’ beds like pets and hunted their food for them, getting only the scraps. At its worst, Jeb came along. He was the leader of the greatest Alpha clan, the Bloodmoon. Jeb was so handsome, oh, he was a beautiful man.” Granma puts her hand over her heart and looks to the ceiling.

“Keep going.”

“Oh, right! Anyway, handsome Jeb had a vision where he spoke with Chrysos and decided to abolish Alpha and Beta rule. He removed the collars from the Betas. But many Alphas disagreed and even some Betas. They had been slaves all their lives and didn’t know what to do when they were freed. And that’s when the clan wars started. The Bloodmoon, Jeb’s clan, and the Oasis wolves were allies and fought against the others together. The Sandstones and the Scrapclaws attacked; they wanted to keep their slaves. In the middle of all the clans were the Moonriders who had allegiance to the Bloodmoon but relied on their Beta slaves. They staved off the fighting for a bit, but soon they joined the Scrapclaws and Sandstones and attacked poor, handsome Jeb.”

“Which clan were you in, Granma?” Luc asks.

“I was with the Oasis wolves. We spent most of our time sunning ourselves and taking dips in the Oasis. Ah, I miss the Oasis...” Granma leans back in her chair.

“How did Jeb win the war?” I say.

“Jeb did something radical, something no Kwewu had done before. He made an alliance with the humans. They had better technology and stronger weapons, and together they crushed the strongest clan, the Moonriders, in one fell swoop. When the other clans got wind of their demise, they bowed to Jeb and surrendered their slaves to freedom.”

“What happened to Jeb? Where is he now?” I ask.

“Jeb died in the fight against the Moonriders and left his legacy to his son, Fenrir, who I hear is even more handsome. Vice-President George made him the commander of the Vivé army.”

“All of them, fighting for what’s right. Maybe we should too,” I say.

“We have to. That blinkin’ President hates us and he won’t rest until we’re all dead.”

“I wanna be like Jeb, Granma. Do you think I’ll grow strong like Jeb?” asks Luc.

"You will, and you'll be just as handsome too." She leans forward and scruffs up his head fur.

"Didn't lots of us die in the clan wars?" I ask.

"There was bloodshed. I saw many of my friends die in battle. I'll never forget the savagery. You shoulda seen me though." Granma punches the air. "I took down more wolves than your Grandad, Ma and Pa combined."

"Grandad died in the clan wars, didn't he?"

"He did. Silly ol' coot, died savin' me from a nasty bunch of Moonriders."

"Why would you want us to fight again then?" I don't want to see what I saw in the prison ever again. Kwewu tearing each other apart. Spilling each other's lives on the concrete like it's nothing.

"You don't have to kill people to fight 'em, Skar. What Luc did was a form of fightin'. When one person stands against the rules and everyone can see it, others will follow."

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ELLBRAY

Chapter 16: A New Ally

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The smell of the Boonshield's fake morning dew perks my nose. I awaken slouched against the cold door with an ache in my lower back. The ritual begins: extending each claw into a stretch, tapping them against my canines to check they're both razor sharp, ensuring each holster has a fully loaded weapon, and twitching my ears for the sound of intrusion below. I lick down unruly knots in my fur. Ritual complete. Light footsteps press against the carpet inside the room behind me. I slide open the door but stay in the frame, hammered into the ground like a desert teleporter.

"You're lucky Roth branded you his very own dog." Beth rifles through a drawer, pulling out a plastic gun with a large metal needle attached to the end. "You don't strike me as the type to follow a curfew like the rest of your kind."

I wrap my paws behind my back and stare at the sheets and pillows crinkled into a pile in the centre of Beth's bed. "Another rough sleep?" I ask. A chill lifts strands of my fur. I increase the heat on the temperature modifier next to the UV distributor.

"Aren't you scared?" she says. "This curfew is a stepping stone to genocide."

The room warms and my fur returns to its groomed position. I slide into the hovering chair. I like the weightlessness of a good hover chair. I whip out my searing blade, heat it up, and shave away a large patch of fur on my forearm, nodding to her as I finish. She hesitates for a few seconds but then loads the plastic nano-gun still clutched between her fingers. One hand on her hip, she presses the needle against my shaven skin.

"What does concern me is mere moments after announcing Kwewu emit radiation that kills unborn human children, he sends me to babysit his unborn child," I say.

"Strange, isn't it?" Beth inserts the needle into my skin. "Do you know what I'm injecting you with?"

"Nanomachines," I reply.

"My gift to you," she says.

She inserts the large needle into a bulging vein. A sudden pain ripples down my arm. We share the same goal, she said it herself. Whatever she's giving me will get us closer to it.

"Do you know what they do?" she says.

"Microscopic robots that keep my body at optimal health." Frost fills my veins as Beth pulls the trigger and lets the tiny metallic bugs filter into my circulatory system. A taste like the rust of an outdated android. Movement inside my body grips my organs. Loss of control, like a howl at the moons.

"Nanomachines are a double-edged blade, we've become so reliant on them that our natural immunities are mostly non-existent now. Every newborn clone or child must be injected as soon as they leave the womb. They are 99% effective, but that's not the problem. Each set of nanomachines is made specifically to match the DNA of the host so the body won't attack it, and they each have their own unique signal. That means from the moment you're born, G.R.A.Z.I.A. can trace you, wherever you go, whatever you do. There are ways to make them untraceable, but only the rich and powerful can afford it. Count yourself lucky you're not getting the civilian ones." She chuckles. "You're getting combative Nanomachines. The undetectable kind."

I blink over and over, trying to hide my tears. They've made it to my brain, and they're digging in. Hard.

"Let me enlighten you." She grips the needle and pulls it out, making sure not to widen the wound. Blood pools over the thumb-sized hole in my arm. Within seconds, Beth places a tiny device

over it and presses until it clicks. The hole in my skin staples shut. “Lie back,” she says, changing the angle of the hover chair to 90 degrees. She spritzes a chemical on the closed wound; it itches like poison-resistant fleas, but my fur grows back like nothing happened.

Beth smirks. “The first capability of the nanomachines is restorative. They heal internal and external wounds, release adrenaline and pump you full of anaesthetic. You can still feel and move your body, but you’re pain free.” Her smile grows wider. “The second is offensive. They stimulate your brain and body so it can fight when it’s close to expiration. You can keep loading your plasma gun with your own blood long after you normally would have died.” Her stance grows taller. “Muscle hypertrophy for physical brutality, tremor reduction for deadeye aim and amygdala inhibition for fearless soldiers. Zombies that fight.”

My snout tingles. Whiskers tremble. Lungs spasm. I take a deep breath. “And after the fight?” I gulp.

“That’s the amazing thing about my nanomachines, they adapt and repair, but without the normal pangs of demise, most soldiers fight beyond the point of return. Even with the best medical care, I can’t always save them.”

“I won’t know if I’m dying?”

“No, but you’ll crush your enemies before you know.”

I’d been trying to work it out. Right from the moment I’d watched her show her inflated stomach on that projected stage during Roth’s speech. “You’re a weapons engineer,” I state.

“In a way, yes. I’m more of a specialist in biological weapons.” Her tone a far reach from that of the scientist I saw on stage. “The kind of weapons you can take out of organisms, put inside them, or grow.”

I look at her stomach. “I see.” Maybe we’re not as alike as she’d have me think.

“Unlike myself, you’ll be able to hide from G.R.A.Z.I.A.”

They do not need to know my every move. “Thank you.”

“Now we can work on the next part of my plan.”

“There’s something I need to ask you.” I get out of the chair and take a deep breath. “Do you know who killed Trudo and Ren?”

Beth pauses for a moment too long and blurts out a flat “No.” She packs up the medical supplies. “And you’d be wise not to ask around about that.”

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LILLY

**Chapter 17: Protest**

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Dad's been cooped up in his office all day at projection meetings, his guards bunched up at his door. Him and Verne come out for some capsules and I hear them talking as they walk back to Dad's office.

"Should I request that they disperse, Sir?"

"No, let them protest, maybe it'll send a message to Roth. Though I doubt he cares about a couple of signs," says Dad.

Dad leaves the games room unlocked now. I boot up Shelly and control her with the joystick. Her crab-arms take me outside the mansion gates, showing me lots of legs and feet and boots all lined up. Shelly's about the size of my hand, so she can sneak around without anyone catching her. I move her googly-eyes up and see heaps of cute wolfs. One of them looks the same height as me. She has cocoa coloured fur and a little gold hoop through one of her pointed ears. The wolf next to her holds her paw and a sign. I zoom Shelly's eyes in and see it, it's a projection coming from his ring saying, 'Down with the curfew'. I'm pretty sure a curfew is like a bedtime, and I hate having a bedtime. Maybe they think Dad can change it for them, I hope he changes it for me too.

There are some humans helping too. They've linked arms, so it goes human—wolf—human—wolf—human—wolf, and then the two at each end have their own signs, 'Together we're strong'. I really want to pat the wolfs, their fluff looks softer than my silk dress. Shelly just doesn't cut it. I take her to the God wolf fountain and spring her into the water. We dive underneath. The screen goes all fuzzy and the Luckygrass looks huge. Verd said that if we planted it, the God Wolf would bless us with a new child for every blade. I'm not so sure though: if Chrysos is the God of the wolfs, who's the God of the humans? I count all the rubbish between the grass, a bit



of thread, a whisker, a fish bone—ew! - a pebble, and a ripped PC lens. Sometimes I wish I could live outside the gates. All the houses look small and cosy, and they never have guards inside their homes. Dad hasn't let me visit the plaza as much lately, so I've been stuck on my own. Khalid's never around and Verne's always next to Dad looking serious. I've played with Dolly and Shelly and I've been to the Earth room and seen all the different continents and I've used the mix-it to make all these weird capsules but there's nobody to talk to and I'd rather see people than do all the other things alone.

I take Shelly back to her spot under a rock and shut her down. There are voices echoing down the halls but it's still quiet. I throw on my pink coat and ribbon and skip to the big front door. But then I remember last time when the guards told me off and I had to go back to my room. I know that Khalid has been sneaking in and out of the house, he must know a way. His door is so big and tall that I can't reach the handle. It's always filthy and covered in fingerprints. I knock on the door in case he's home. He swings it open and looks at me with a frown.

"What do you want?"

"I want to go to the plaza. Can you take me?"

"Go out the front door."

"The guards won't let me."

"Why do you want out?" Khalid's shoes have dirt on them and are laced up.

"To see the wolfs."

"Won't your beloved Daddy let you mingle with the dogs?"

"He's busy."

"Or do you want to defy your coward of a father?"

"I just want to pat the—"

"If you say it's to defy father, I might show you the way."

I look through his legs at his fully made bed and empty capsule bottles around the room.

"Okay."

Khalid drags me in by my coat arm and shuts the door, locking all three locks on the back. He walks over to his bed and points to the open window. "Look at all those mutts surrounding the manse, Lord Kabel would never allow such nonsense. I swear your father's scared of them."

"He's your Dad too, dummy!"

"Oh, I highly doubt we have the same father, or mother, for that matter. He couldn't care less about my comings and goings, yet he protects you like some precious gem. Probably because you look so much like your mother." He waves me over to him. "This is your way out."

"Don't talk like that. She's your Mamma too!" Mamma loved Khalid lots, and so does Dad. I scramble over his bed, messing up the duvet, and look out. "It's too high!"

"Not when you have this." He pulls out a black board from underneath his bed and flips the orange switch underneath it. He jumps on the floating board and it doesn't fall.

"You aren't meant to ride hover-boards too high up."

"Don't be a wuss." He jumps off the board and pushes it over to me. "Here's the control." He throws it at me. I almost miss it. "Use the button to lower it down to ground level."

I push the board out the window and feel goosebumps spring up on my arms. My tongue goes dry and my legs wobble when I jump on it. Khalid gives me a thumbs up and then turns off the window. I lean on the mansion wall to keep my balance and use the little control to lower it. I wrap my skirt between my legs so no-one down below can see my undies. It doesn't take long to get me down the side of the house. There's a bend in the fence about the shape of Khalid. I crawl through it

and down the pebble alleyways, through the two silver houses, where our neighbours Pat and Rebel live, and out onto the walkway to the plaza. I see all the wolfs and humans with their signs, just a few footsteps away. I jump up and down and hop towards them until I crash into something soft. I fall flat on my bum and scrape my hands. The big lump that stopped me is Mr Fenrir. He has black fur and a sugar-white nose. He scrambles to pick me up from the cobblestone and looks at my sore hands.

“Lilly, my apologies. What are you doing out here?” Mr Fenrir says, putting a paw over my cuts. “Does it hurt?”

I can feel the tears welling in my eyes but if Khalid finds out I cried like a baby only a little while after he helped me outside, he’ll be mean to me and never help again. So I have to be brave. “I wanted to say hi to the wolfs in the plaza.”

Mr Fenrir looks at the big group of people and wolfs with his ruby eyes. “It’s not safe for you here. This is a protest against G.R.A.Z.I.A.”

Dad works for G.R.A.Z.I.A. “Does that mean they’re angry at Dad?”

Mr Fenrir closes his eyes and nods. “Can you get back inside without your father seeing you? He might have a heart attack if I march you right up the front gate.”

“Khalid shut his window on me, and that’s how I got out.”

“Hmm.” He sniffs. “We’ll try the side gate. I can smell a lone human there.”

Mr Fenrir carries me the whole way, so I don’t even have to walk, and takes me to one of the small gates by the neighbour’s house. Verne is standing outside with veiny eyes. I jump out of Mr Fenrir’s arms and hug Verne. His eyes bulge out of their sockets.

“Lilly, how did you get outside?” says Verne.

“Looks like her brother is being a nuisance again,” says Mr Fenrir.

“Thank you for bringing her back safely,” says Verne.

Mr Fenrir turns away but stops before he leaves. “Tell George to consider it the last gesture of good faith. Unless he’s had a change of heart about including us in his plans.”

Verne doesn’t answer, and Mr Fenrir leaves.

“He said that the wolfs are mad at Dad.” I tug on Verne’s pants. “Maybe I can help so they won’t be mad at him anymore.”

Verne pats me on the head. “Maybe another time.”

“But if we wait too long to say sorry, they might never forgive us.” Mamma taught me that.

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BETH

**Chapter 18: Don't Put Nanos in Wolves**

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Ellbray crashes into the bed frame. I stop absentmindedly rubbing my belly and jolt from the bed. Baubles of sweat line her fur. I tap her nose and find it desert dry.

"Get on the bed."

She squeezes my arms and slumps onto her knees with a crack. Trembling and stuck in that position, hot as a blazing fire. A dog can brew a mighty fever. She leans into my shoulder and heaves herself upright with a faint yelp, then falls flat on the edge of my bed. I dart to my nightstand and inject coolant into her ear. She whines and lets me place a pillow under her head. Her snout twitches.

I switch my glasses to bio-scan and look at Ellbray's circulatory system. "Your body's rejecting the nanomachines."

Her crystal blue eyes are distant, staring through the ceiling, unfocussed.

"Open up." I hold a capsule to her lips. "It won't be pleasant, but it'll help."

I shove the anti-rejection meds between her sharp teeth. She swallows and closes her eyes. Her body convulses and foam dribbles from her mouth. I shift her head to one side.

"It'll stop soon. You can get through it." I hope this isn't because of the modifications I made.

Her muscles lock and twitch. White strands of fur float into the air, shining like dust between rays of light. The clock counts ten minutes. She stops shaking and her body collapses into jelly.

"The nanomachines will sense your pain and try to stop it, but your body will fight them and that's what's going to hurt. Don't worry, the nanomachines will win."

"I'm going to die," Ellbray says weakly.

“Not a chance. My nanomachines never fail.” I place a cold hand on Ellbray’s forehead and run my fingers through her fur. Her brows unfurrow.

“Sleep.”

I dim the lights and place a sheet over her body. She tosses and turns all night, barking and howling. Delirium. The coolant has barely made a dent in her temperature.

“Snap out of it, Ellbray! Fight it!” I grab her shoulders and press my nails into her collarbones to try and wake her. Her white-blue eyes flash open and she jumps up, grappling my throat.

“If it weren’t for the politics, he’d have married me!” she shouts, squeezing tighter on my neck. I try desperately to pry her claws away. She sways, probably lightheaded, which distracts her long enough to let me gasp for a sliver of air.

“Someone killed them! And if I find out who, I’m going to rip out their veins.” Ellbray releases my throat and crumbles onto the ground.

“This is why I don’t put nanos in wolves,” I mutter to myself, rubbing the marks on my neck.

Ellbray and I make it through the night. When I wake, she’s cool to the touch and breathing normally again. “I said you’d live,” I say as her eyes blink open.

“Did I...” Ellbray snaps upright and stares at the bruises on my neck. “Did I do that?”

“The delirium did.” A knock at the door distracts us. “Though you did say some interesting things.” I open the door and am immediately accosted by twins Mansyl and Saed, Roth’s annoying PR managers.

“Oh, may I?” Mansyl asks.

I nod. Mansyl places his hand against my stomach and rubs.

Ellbray snaps to my side, upright with a hand on her sheathed dagger.

“We’ve organised some excellent news pieces.” Saed pulls out a mini projector. “An article about how you’re hoping for a girl, and a doctored photoshoot with Roth. You’ve got somewhat of a cult following on your baby’s media feed. Hormone readings within the Boonshield show high levels of dopamine. Congratulations, you’ve brought happiness to the Floating City.”

“I presume those readings exclude Kwewu?” I look at Ellbray and roll my eyes.

Saed touches my shoulder. “Aw, don’t sweat the little things, Bethany, you can’t make everyone happy.”

The name ‘Bethany’ brings back too many memories of mother’s yelling fits.

“We need you to do your own bit of PR in public today. You’ll shop for baby clothes in one of the high-end level clone stores. Any good publicity for you is good publicity for Roth and G.R.A.Z.I.A., understand?”

I nod. As if I have a choice.

“I’m coming,” Ellbray perks up.

“The dog can’t come, it’s during the curfew. I’m not having any special treatment,” says Saed.

I link arms with Ellbray. “She’s Roth’s right-hand wolf, he’ll want her there.”

Mansyl furrows his eyebrows and crosses his arms.

“Let me put it this way,” says Ellbray. “Try and stop me.”

They take me to the high-level district and already have the media waiting. They follow at a distance, with subtle gestures to keep me moving in the direction they want. The first hologram in the Diamond Mall shows a man and a woman, changing clothes and glasses instantly to match, along with the text:

‘Eyesight correction? Glasses are an indicator of intellect, integrity, and poise. Get a pair of warp glasses with 500 designs and protection from all forms of damaging light for only \$999. What’s the point in perfect vision if you don’t look good?’

The illusion of a minor imperfection like damaged eyesight is desirable.

The hologram next to it is pure white with a close-up of an eye. Rainbow-coloured eyeliner bleeds from its perfect lower lid.

‘Eye colour is a concept. An abstract piece of art formed by your perception. Colour changing perma-lenses, buy one get one 50% off. If the eyes are the window to your soul, show them the soul you want.’

Aesthetic items have become a ridiculous movement, so much so that a group called the Purists now refuse to date anyone with visual modifications. As if there’s a human on Cetera without some piece of technology boosting their sex appeal.

I enter the ‘Born in Glitter’ store and the shop assistant scans my belly.

“Approximately 5lbs at birth, these sizes will be perfect. Feel free to choose any alterations you like, free of charge today. We’ll 3D print them for you straight away.” She taps a few buttons on the computer. “The first product I’ll ever supply to a non-clone baby.” She claps and jumps up and down. “My store will be famous!”

“Mmh.” I look away from the scan.

A group of citizens bunch up behind me, following at a short distance. “Beth, Beth! Is it true you grew up in The Mantle?” one says.

“Beth, would you sign my belly? I’m pregnant with a clone child but maybe with a little of your luck I can have a real baby too?”

“Is it true you’ve worked for G.R.A.Z.I.A. since you were fifteen?”



"Can I touch your belly, pretty please? I've been watching the stream non-stop, it's so cute!"

I take a deep breath and release the tension running wires around my neck. "Go on then."

Four of them rush me and grab at my stomach.

Ellbray's fur stands up. "Don't know how you stand it." She crosses her arms.

"They're my loyal followers, Ell, what more could a woman want?" I laugh. "I suppose she could crave the power in your fists too."

Ellbray shrugs. "Power breeds death."

I whisper, "The Capital has lacked mortality for much too long."

One of the follower's bumps into Ellbray, whose blank face doesn't comfort them.

"What is this monstrosity doing here? Won't it harm Cetera's firstborn?"

"Ellbray is one of my experiments. I am investigating ways of reducing Kwewu radiation output and making great strides. Please be assured our contact is limited and one Kwewu on its own will only produce very minute waves of radiation. Levels you would not detect with standard equipment."

"You're saying it's when they gang together their dangerous?"

"Correct."

"Onto more important matters, Miss Beth," a gaudy woman interrupts. "We have a dedicated meeting every week with the Beth Ultimate Fanclub and we just wanted to know whether your favourite colour was in fact blue or pink because some of the members were debating over it and we'd really love an answer."

"Excuse me, but we are the Original Beth Fanclub! These guys are just knock offs, and we know for sure that your favourite colour is actually green!" The man pokes his tongue out.

“Who cares about that!” A woman shoves through the two fanclub leaders. “Can you touch my belly? I want to get pregnant too.”

“Now, now, I have time for all of you.” I hush the crowd. “My favourite colour is actually red.” The colour of blood always looks good on me.

Ellbray lets out a long breath and frowns.

“I’m happy to spread my luck to all of you.” I bless the mindless saps as they line up before me. The crowd has doubled in size. “If you want to write to me, see my PR managers Mansyl and Saed, they’ll be in the area.”

“Please, Beth, tell us what to do so we can be pregnant with a real baby like you.”

“My only advice is...” I think for a short moment, calculating my response. “To stay away from groups of Kwewu.” I wink at Ellbray.

Heads in the crowd nod one after another.

“I must continue shopping.”

The people boo and squeeze in tight, but Ellbray parts the way for me as they jolt back like she’s made of flames.

“Thanks a lot.” Ellbray growls.

“Welcome,” I say.

We look through numerous shops until we get to one of the most expensive stores, Living Stars. We’re approached by a tall wiry man rubbing his hands together. His skin covered in a sheen of sweat. He hunches down to my height. His pink tie crooked and loose.

“M-M-Ma’am,” he stutters. “T-two options for a h-high class l-lady such as yourself.” He points to the 3D likeness printer. A cheap piece of technology, it predicts the baby’s image upon

birth and allows shop owners to scan through different clothes for the child. “W-we have standard s-silver cloth and g-gold dummies. B-but for you, I have the u-ultra rare Galacktite piece.”

“Galacktite? Impossible. It’s been mined to death.”

He pulls pieces of fallen hair off his jacket and scratches his nose. “J-Just for you, P-P-President Roth had it brought in.” He swallows and I watch his large Adam’s apple move along his throat. “I’ll just create your b-b-baby’s image f-for the likeness printer.” He pulls out a 3D scanner from a marble box lined with velvet.

Ellbray stops the shopkeeper with a firm arm. “I don’t trust him,” she says to me.

I snatch the scanner and check the settings. “Filled with radiation.” They want my baby dead.

The shopkeeper tries to flee, but Ellbray shoves her knee into his stomach and cracks a fist against his spine, knocking him out cold. Mansyl, Saed and their media drones fly in at the sound of commotion. Wide-eyed and nervy, Mansyl and Saed march me from the shop floor straight to G.R.A.Z.I.A. headquarters. The twins spew sewage from their lips into Roth’s ears, one exaggeration after another. Their gangly snake arms slither through mine, keeping me snug in the middle. Ellbray hangs by the door. Roth presses his ear against my belly. I have the urge to fling the twins into him. Squish him flat between them.

“You’re still alive, my son, I can hear you fighting in there,” says Roth.

“Your son survived a terrorist attack. That’s great news,” says Mansyl.

Your ‘son’ only survived because of me and Ellbray. It wasn’t some miracle.

“You should tell the world,” says Saed.

Roth gets to his feet, eyes and face red, forehead wrinkled, fists balled pallid. “I need to make someone suffer for this. Who was it?”

The twins lean down and stare at my stomach. They latch a hand on each side and press.

“The shopkeeper is in a cell waiting to be sent to Tulsa prison. But he was a pawn, threatened into murder by a Kwewu gang. They call themselves The Last Moonriders,” says Mansyl.

“I don’t care about their name. Bring them to me, alive or headless, doesn’t matter. And kill the shopkeeper.”

The twins let go of my stomach, but I’m still shackled in between them.

“Kubro’s bringing them to you as we speak,” Saed smirks. “I will call the jail guards. They can take care of the shopkeeper.”

Silent minutes pass. Roth’s foot tapping hastens. Kubro bounds in, puffed, and pushes two young Kwewu onto their knees. Can’t be older than eighteen. They’re shaking, staring at Roth’s feet. One of them urinates on the rug.

“The gang leaders,” says Kubro, releasing their collars and throwing them into the ground.

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.” Roth rubs his hands together.

“You should show the world your vengeance,” says Mansyl.

“Yes, you should broadcast it to them all,” says Saed.

Roth flashes me a glare. “We’ll enact your brilliant North Cape plan Beth, it’s about time. Saed, tell Vice-President George it’s time for him to hold up his end of the bargain.” He smiles. “Turn the broadcast on.”

The twins nod in unison, release me and exit through a side door. The speaker comes on and Mansyl counts down from ten.

One of the Kwewu looks at me for a split second. Grey eyes as human as mine beg me to step in.

“Two.... one.”

The computer speaks her usual recording. “We interrupt your viewing for an urgent public announcement. Please standby for an official G.R.A.Z.I.A. broadcast.”

Roth straightens his tie and stands in position behind the Kwewu. “I come to you, my people, with a grave announcement. It causes me great pain to see a gang target an unborn child, what a great tragedy it would have been. Yes, this group of Kwewu attacked my unborn child today, trying to irradiate it.” Roth paces back and forth and squeezes their shoulders. “The irony! They’ve irradiated our potential children for years, we protect them with the curfew, and now they try to do it again to my son. We’ve given them too much say, too much power. We’ve let them live in our Capital and breathe our Boonshield, and in return they’ve stifled our reproduction and tried to kill our first natural born. As your President, I don’t take these traitorous acts lightly.” He kicks the two Kwewu from behind, sending them face first into the ground.

“This isn’t just about my child though, it’s about all of your children. Your heart breaks at your children’s sterility. They weep as they watch their clones die in their arms before you, praying that the precious cells they donated live a little longer this time. A loss they face every day, a loss no parent should ever endure.”

The live feed of a crowd in the virtual reality plane plays on the electronic wall in front of Roth. He sees his mob of human followers cheer and chant, “Save our children! Kill the monsters!”

I stare at the Kwewu boys, half-wolf, half-human, created by us. I try to imagine their fear, anger and hatred, but the taste of revenge is sweet on my lips. Had they succeeded, my baby would be dead. They’ll get what they deserve.

“There is no penalty harsh enough to punish these men!”

The crowd screams in agreement.

Boys though, they're boys. They're somebody's children. An emotion must have shown on my face because Ellbray wraps her paw around my hand. Or maybe she's scared. I whisper to her, "You saved my baby, Ell. I made the right choice, trusting you."

Ell whispers back, her mouth barely moving, "Children deserve our protection."

I bite my lip and hold her hand suffocatingly tight. Don't do it Ellbray. Don't try to save them.

Roth chimes in. "It may not be the perfect punishment, but I'll take second best. Kubro, dematerialise them."

Dematerialising, the first part of teleportation without the reconstruction. The most painful death imaginable, like falling into a black hole, ripped apart cell by cell, every atom in your body combusting, one excruciating explosion after another. I squeeze Ellbray's paw. She squeezes back. I can feel her body trying to leave my side, but I can't let her do it.

Kubro pulls out the deconstructor from the weapon wall and drags it in front of the first boy. The pleading starts. The boys sob and scream, but their whimpers fuel the crowd.

"Please Sir, no, just kill us! Please, please, not like this! My mum will see this, don't do this to her."

"Kill it."

"Torture it!"

"They don't deserve our mercy!"

They would've hurt me, a mother too. Let me watch my own baby vaporise, crust, and turn to ash. Feel its life slip away inside me. You beg for mercy for one mother but not another.

Roth nods and wraps his hands behind his back. "Let this be a lesson, Moonriders. If I find you, you'll be dematerialised too."

Kubro sets up the deconstructor, but before he can turn it on, Roth runs over and fingers the trigger, pushing Kubro to one side. He flips it on.

One Kwewu boy watches the other disintegrate. His skin peels off, muscle next, layer by layer, down to the cells, a pile of red on the floor. His cries broadcast to the world. His pain a triumphant melody to the crowd of waving human fists. Ellbray's body is flaming hot, hard-boiled.

"Your turn," Roth laughs, looking at the other terrified Kwewu boy.

My stomach churns. Acid swirls and foams at my tongue. Ellbray swallows and averts her gaze. Even Kubro turns away. But I can't stop looking, staring at the remains, listening to the cries.

Roth holds his hands over the trigger and stares into my eyes. For a moment, the shards of his irises look like a mirror. We share a strike of electricity and, still staring at me, he pushes it again. I'm connected to him. An intoxicating energy we share in our veins, the sweet pangs of revenge. There's no scientist, no President. Just two monsters sharing one mind. The realisation sends bile shooting from my stomach and through my oesophagus. Acid bubbles at my throat. I'm as sick as Roth. Our hearts beat in sync at the sight of suffering. In that instant, I forgive him. For every foul word spat. For every hour imprisoned. For all the times he beat me - sometimes within an inch of my life. I have to forgive him, so I can forgive myself.

The other Kwewu is dead.

"Let this be a warning to all Kwewu on Cetera. Another false move, and you'll end up like them."

The broadcast ends. "Mansyl! Saed! Get the grunts to round up the Kwewu on the streets. They're going to the North."

I let out a sharp breath I didn't know I was holding. Ellbray's shaking paw loosens from mine and curls into a fist.

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FENRIR

Chapter 19: Call to Action

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In my kitchen, I do a kind of magic I wish I had when it came to the war council meetings. Mixing new combinations of herbs, meats, and sauces in the Capseed with hints of white and red wine, tinges of spice and pinches of things you'd only taste after digesting the capsule. The ingredients come from the Earth-DNA bank. Father always insisted I ate the fruits of Cetera, what did he call capsules again? *The ghosts of Earth*. Fox and Luria are in the lounge, giggling and murmuring in low tones. I peek my head around the corner.

"Nearly done," I say.

Luria brushes Fox's arm. He smirks and leans back in the chair. "You'd best hurry, she's telling me all of your secrets," says Fox.

That's right, she trusts him.

I press the start button on the Capseed and wait a few minutes. It ticks and then chimes, releasing three equally sized capsules. I hand one to Fox, one to Luria, and hold mine in one hand. Sitting down between them, they stare at each other.

"Three, two..." says Luria.

"One," says Fox.

They both swallow the capsules at the same time and wait as the flavours simulate food on their tongues. Hitting each taste bud uniquely, in a specific order with a graded strength, their eyes light up.

"Synthetic food has never tasted so great," Fox chirps. "Aren't you going to eat too?"

"The chef eats last." I swallow my capsule.



Luria brushes against me. “A lucky girl I am, to have a talented, honest, kind man at my side,” she says. “And one with such great taste in friends too.” She smiles at Fox. “Why don’t you invite him over more often?”

“I suspect, Luria, in the brief moments he does get alone with you, he’d rather not have his shadow looking over you both.” Fox laughs. “Am I right?”

Brash knocks on the front door interrupt the moment. My capsule sits half-digested in my gut and Verd is outside. This is not a good sign.

“Sir, I am loath to disturb you at home, but your war councillors are all gathered. Have you seen the news?”

“Not yet.”

Fox projects his PC from his iris for all of us to see. A news piece direct from the Presidential suite in G.R.A.Z.I.A. where two Kwewu children are slaughtered. Luria dry heaves and runs into the kitchen. Fox runs after her.

“Kwewu being threatened, children slaughtered without mercy... I won’t have it!” I slam my fists against the floor.

“It is...” Verd pauses. “A tragic day for Kwewu everywhere.”

I jump to my feet and find Fox and Luria, his arm around her as she sobs. “We go. Now.” I put my coat on. “Now.” I grimace. Luria looks up at me with wet cheeks and whirlpool eyes. I turn away.

Fox and I sprint to the war council and find everyone else gathered, talking in shrieks.

“Kredo, I want you to bring the clan warriors to Vivé.”

“Might as well recruit stray dogs and beggars while you’re at it,” says Kredo.

"Is this wise? These aren't warriors, they won't be merciful to our enemies," Verd says.

I bite my lip bloody. "They have our people!" I yell and turn to Kredo. "The humans can have a taste of our brutal hatred. We will destroy East Cape at dawn tomorrow. Bring the remains of the Oasis wolves, the Scrapclaws, and the Sandstones here, I want every single one of them fighting for our side, hear me?"

Verd leans in and whispers, "may the Gods be more merciful than these warriors."

"This is the beginning of your downfall, Fen." Fox lowers his voice to a whisper. "Go back and comfort your wife, think this through for more than a moment."

Kredo gets to his feet. "It's not right, but we have to win." He nods to me and leaves the room.

I glare at Fox. "Next time, if you care to doubt me, wait till the room is empty or you'll fight in the vanguard where your father did."

Fox smirks. "You take your allies for granted, another mistake."

"And what would you do so differently?"

"I wouldn't fight."

"You'd watch your people suffer?"

"The President has changed the game. I'd watch, for a time, while I burnt away at the Capital's resources, money, and connections and made my own allies. The President's reign would collapse beneath itself without a single battle."

"Win one battle and burn all of it to the ground at once. That's what I plan to do."

"With the feral Kwewu whose battle cry is a toothed growl? You won't win."

“You think I’m stupid? I have the advantage, the Capital doesn’t know we’re coming, and George has the teleporter and its guards on our side. We’ll be able to get to East Cape without detection and garrison it to prepare for the fight at the Capital.”

“And you trust him?”

“He wants us to win. Now get out of my sight.”

Fox tells me not to doubt myself and then doubts me in front of my advisers. If he plans to wait in Vivé as more of my people die, then so be it. I have Kredo, I’ll have the clansmen and my army. I don’t need him. *I am the Commander, do not question my instruction. I and I alone remain responsible for the consequences. When I request peace, I expect peace, and if that is not attained, my weapon will be drawn.* My father’s decisions were respected, honoured, and followed without hesitation, and I deserve the same.

When I arrive home, Luria is curled in a ball with knotted fur, her snout still wet with tears. I hold her tight.

“Don’t worry, my love, I will take care of this.”

She sniffs. “What have you done?” She pushes me away.

“What do you mean?”

“Enlisting the clansmen.” She jumps from the bed, more tears streaming down her beautiful face. “You know what they did to me as a girl! How could you?”

I sit up and my muscles tense. “Fox has already been and gone?”

“Not that you would ever share your plans with me.” She sits on the edge of the bed, leaving a large gap between us. “This is a mistake!”

“You saw what they did to those children. What if it happens again?”

“Do you think their mothers will revel in your revenge? This isn’t about them; this is about you. No, this is about your father, and being stronger than him, living up to his legacy like everyone expects you to.”

“Please, Luria, I need a night of peace before this war begins.” I hold out my paw to her.

She sniffs back a last tear and wipes her face dry. Accepting my hand, she lies back down and lets me curl up behind her. “I love you,” I say.

I wake to the sound of bells chiming and Verd yelling in the street. “I’ve cracked the code! The scriptures speak true - Fenrir is our third moon, our true leader!”

I look out the window. Verd marches past with his arms in the air, followed by a crowd of robed Kwewu.

“Don’t get lost in your sadness. You have your saviour!”

With protesters lining the streets, mourners aching over the loss of the two Kwewu boys, and tension rising between Kwewu and humans, the last thing we need is a false God in the mix.

I throw on a coat and rush out the door. Following the crowd, I press through them and find Verd in front of the fountain, legs crossed, a gaggle of kids at his feet. He sings:

“When the false have greyed

Three like the moon

Our son will rise

From dirts and seas

To colour our grasses

With green again.”

Verd holds out his arms. “Children, this is what the Golden God sang—”

“Verd! Can I speak with you?”

“One moment, Commander.”

“The Golden God meant—”

“What lies are you filling my son’s head with? Get over here, Rye,” says Kredo.

“Rye, would you be a dear and pick up that book for me? ‘Tis very heavy, I could lift it, but it would cause me great displeasure.”

Rye picks up the book.

“Thank you, let me read you this.”

“What good is having Gods when you’re weak?” Kredo barks.

“No-one is weak with a God at their back,” Verd replies.

“Pfft. Rye, get here or no supper.”

Rye runs to him. Kredo whispers to me. “This whacko better be off the war council now, or I’ll have something to say.” He drags Rye by his shirt and leaves the growing crowd, now filled with humans and Kwewu alike.

“Verd, I’d like to speak with you. Alone.”

“Speak truly in front of the God Wolf’s children, they won’t judge.”

“Why are you spreading these falsities?”

“Prophecies.”

“You need to cut this out. Stop spreading false hope. I’m not the saviour, I’m just a wolf.”

“The words of our God are not false hope, they are our only hope. With Kwewu being killed and bloodshed on the horizon, we need our leader to rise.”

"I'll be the leader Vivé needs, but I'm no God."

"See how modest he is, my children? How humble! The marks of a true leader!"

The crowd, some on their knees, some staring at me with eyes of burning hope. A woman yells, "to Fenrir, our true leader!" They roar and chant my name.

"Do not listen to this. You all take part in making legends, and if we stand together, we can protect our people and stop G.R.A.Z.I.A. I am but a wolf, but all of you together are a force. One no man like Roth can stop!"

The crowd claps and screams. "To the true leader!" someone in the crowd yells. "To the true leader!" Others follow, chanting in succession.

I see Fox and Luria at the corner of my eye. I grumble at the crowd and leave them to their conspiracies.

"When did he start this madness?" I ask them.

"He was up all night in the church, alone, after the war council reading the scriptures. I guess sleep deprivation can cause madness," says Fox.

"What is he talking about, anyway?"

"There are some drawings on the wall in the church, replicas of ones found in Chrysos' grotto. Three faceless figures, wearing crowns, their hands crossed and blurred into one another with a target over their hearts. He believes two false leaders will die for the third face to appear. Which he has decided is you."

"He thinks I'll kill Roth, but who else?"

"Kabel," says Luria. "Once you kill Lord Kabel, the two false leaders are dead and the true one will emerge."

“Nonsense. How would Chrysos know the future? What does he think spreading all these lies will do?” I say.

“Well, I’d assume he thinks that the Gods will bless your moronic battle, since even he believes it’s destined for failure.” Fox grunts. “You still have time to call this off.”

I stare into Luria’s still eyes and then back at Fox, whose eyebrows are knitted, arms crossed. “If it’s war Roth wants, it’s war he gets.”

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**BETH**

**Chapter 20: The Weapon**

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We watch, empty, as G.R.A.Z.I.A. grunts clean up the pile of Kwewu ash and blood in Roth's office. He demands a re-carpeting and insists Ellbray escort me to my prison in case my 'pathetic emotions disturb his triumphant mood'. We sit in silence in the blue room for too long, the air heavy and suffocating.

She breaks the silence. "He's going to kill us all."

I stare at the wall blank-faced for a few minutes. Ellbray paces across the room.

"I worked on a biological weapon for twenty years," I say. "One of the best, alive, invulnerable. They call her the Kamikaze that Doesn't Die."

Ellbray's nose perks up. "What's this got to do with—"

"He took her away from me and gave me a baby instead. The weapon was the image of the head researcher Sarah-Mae. I replaced her when she died."

"Are you in shock? Denial? Did you see what he did to those Kwewu?"

"I wanted to feel like the weapon was my child but when I looked into her eyes, I saw the researcher's instead. After eight years, I hadn't bonded with her. Some part of me hated her. I was some unknown lab tech everyone looked through."

"Great, so you have a child of your own now." Ellbray squeezes my arms. "I have to go home and find my sister. You can stay with Roth and your weapon or you can get the hell out of here with me and save your baby, too."

"One day, that kid looked at me dead in the eye and said 'I know you are sad'. I was completely stoic, hiding my father's death, and somehow this child, without seeing a single tear,



knew I was sad. I asked her how she knew, and she responded, 'Your blood is vibrating'. I had no idea what she meant, but I'd discovered something the head researcher had missed. This kid can sense people's emotions. We figured it was just biological shifts, but she could interpret too. We put two people in a room, one clinically depressed, one of normative mental health, and artificially raised their dopamine levels. She knew which was which without seeing or hearing or touching them. I asked her again how she knew. She said, 'the smell'. I wanted to perform a sensory deprivation experiment, but the head researcher considered it too unethical. When she died, we did the test. We discovered she had a super-human sense."

"I know this is important to you, and maybe important to winning this war." Ellbray shakes me. "Are you coming with me or not?"

"We made her weak and meagre, obedient. I know that we'll never see her strength unless she has reason to. She needs to be pushed to use her power. Don't you see, Ellbray? She can stop him."

"She's the bomb beyond nuclear all his peons whisper about?"

"Yes, she's *that* weapon. She can mimic appearances and sense emotions. She can explode or lose limbs and regenerate. She can match others in physical strength. An adaptive soldier, not just a programmed drone, android or robot. Not nanomachine reliant. Controllable, but wild. If we can clone her perfectly, we'd have an unbeatable army. But for now, we only need one of her. She alone has the power of the Capital's greatest army."

"If we go to your lab, Roth will catch us and kill us," Ellbray says.

"If we kill Roth, the G.R.A.Z.I.A. army will listen to me. I will be the great scientist that takes over Cetera. I know a way to get Roth to send me back to the lab." I stare into her crystal eyes.

"Promise me you'll stay here a little bit longer, and I assure you you'll be able to escape to your sister. Play his right-hand for now."

Ellbray snarls. “How were you ever with that *monster*?” She wraps her paws around my arms.

“He...” I back away from Ellbray and divert my eyes. “When we met, all he could talk about was my potential as a researcher, how he’d make sure I was the leading G.R.A.Z.I.A. scientist. He’d listen to me ramble about my theories all night, fund my private projects, and boast about me in front of the execs. He was going to make my dreams come true.” I shudder. “I confided in him when I lost my father and he even cried with me about his father’s death. I thought he was human.” I walk over to the window and look out at the Floating City, the legacy of Roth’s father, eternally awake. “I’d been with him a year by the time things began crumbling. I knew he wasn’t perfect. Hell, half the experiments I had done weren’t legal. The entire weapons project was a secret.”

“This isn’t your fault, Beth.”

“Oh, but it is. I was drunk, angry, and enraged one night. They were going to shut down my project, reveal its immorality to the company, to the world. And I couldn’t have that. So, I...” I swallow, my lip quivers. “I wrapped my hands around the head researcher’s neck and looked into her eyes until they closed. Forever.” I turn to Ellbray, her eyes deep with empathy. “Roth buried my mistake and I’ve owed him ever since. You see, he and I, we’re both monsters.”

“Are you saying you deserve to suffer at his hand for the rest of your life because of one mistake?”

“He’s hurt me in every way imaginable and I’ve survived because I’m strong and he’s weak. Don’t look at me with eyes full of pity. I’m going to take him down, once and for all.”

“Look,” Ellbray gets to her knees. “I’ve left my sister all alone in Vivé, abandoned the Kwewu in their time of need, and worked for that evil man for too long now. You need help, and I don’t know who can help you, but please, escape with me and be free of him.”

“You’re sweet, Ell, but if I run off with you, Roth will hunt me down until one of us dies. It’s me or him now, and it sure as hell isn’t going to be me.”

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**FAYE**

**Chapter 21: The Depths**

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The light on the front of the sub flickers on. We've hit the bottom of the ocean, a place the sun can't touch. Seagrasses jitter as frilled sharks slither between. Creatures with three-hundred teeth and marbled eyes scatter like living rocks when the sub gets close and the flax gets thin. I've seen it all on a documentary, but it looks better through the submarine glass and the tint of painkillers.

The woman driving the sub said a friend of mine sent her to rescue me. "I don't exactly have any friends," I say after a long, thoughtful silence.

"My name's Alice." She pauses for a moment. "Now you have a friend." But I can't see my new friend's face or even a single body part. She's covered head to toe in gold armour.

We close in on a large grey tentacle. It suctions to the sub's windshield and wraps around until we can't see. I extend my neck upright; my veins tap against my skin and hands tremble.

"The colossal squid's warning." She stops the sub.

The creature's huge deflating balloon head whips by and the tentacle releases us. It reveals a city that looks like tight packed green algae. Houses, temples, and towers appear as alive as the sea around them, and the people who inhabit them. The submarine attaches to a metal claw that eases it through a thick gel. Air rushes into the surrounding chamber. Once it stops, Alice steers us through a second gel wall and into a plastic pipe. She parks at the end of the long winding pipe and presses a blue button on the console. Cool air filters into the pod. Alice flips open the hatch.

"It's safe." She beckons me to follow. I remain in my seat. Unmoving.

She holds out a hand, leading me down the ladder on the side of the sub and onto the sponge-like floor below. My feet suction to the substance, but I can still walk at a slow pace. Schools of lantern fish paint the ceiling like a night sky. I look at my pale hands. They aren't wrinkled or wet. My hair still flows like it's dry.

"Should I be wet?" I ask.

"The gel surrounding us keeps you in a small cloud of oxygen, so you can move while it protects you from the pressure." She points to the billowing slits on the side of a bigeye tuna. "It recycles the oxygen and keeps it fresh, like gills on a fish. It's the same for the sea creatures, they have a bubble of water instead."

"Is it a living organism?"

"It keeps everyone alive by staying concentrated in one place." She presses a button on the side of her head. A small, flat projection streams out from her helmet. A video of a dingy shack draped in red coral, the entryway indiscernible. "Enough questions. Let's go."

An enormous octopus with a bulbous head and a blanket for a tail ripples above me. Rainbow coloured, echoing deep repetitive sounds. My jaw hangs open as I follow its majestic wander through the city. I'm dizzy. Alice grabs my hand and pulls me through a nearby door. A laser sweeps across my body as I enter.

"You haven't bothered to ask my name," I say.

"The girl with special abilities. The ultimate weapon. Subject Nineteen," she says. "Or Faye, if you prefer."

"You work for G.R.A.Z.I.A." I sit on the edge of her tired, melange couch.

She disappears into the kitchen. Clangs and crashes. The squeal of a boiled kettle. She sets a steaming cup of tea on the three-legged coffee table.

“Drink. It’s a cocktail of all the nutrients you’ll need to replenish yourself. You may gain a few kilograms.” She slides the steaming G.R.A.Z.I.A. branded cup over to me.

I stare at it, the curled ‘G’, thick, black capital letters strangling the cup.

“Difficult to find anything that isn’t labelled G.R.A.Z.I.A. nowadays.” It feels like she’s smiling at me, but it’s impossible to know for sure. Her faceless gold helmet gives away nothing.

“Everything in here is so... ancient,” I say. A single sip stops my body’s whines and sighs. I’m a lump of bone and flesh. Morphed into a drifting cloud. “At the lab, the water was instantly hot. No need to boil it.” I dump the weight of shattered muscles, nagging scars and crumbling bones. My neck muscles regain some strength. There is no technology in sight, just endless shelves of cobwebbed books. Not a knick-knack either, just a barren hallway, some dusty surfaces, and a cracked lampshade next to the couch. Guess she isn’t a big decorator. The roof is low to the ground and covered in dents, dirt, and grease.

“You’re not in the lab anymore,” she says.

She covers me with a warm, fluffy blanket. The first time someone’s tucked me in. It could be rare Egyptian cotton, or itchy, second-hand synthetic – either way, it is the softest blanket in my world. Alice walks away; the clangs of her body armour don’t bother me in this state. A door slams shut. My eyelids are heavy again, but this time I don’t fight it. The deeper I fall, the louder that voice gets. The same disembodied voice as when I fell unconscious on the beach.

*You survived. I’m surprised.*

“I didn’t plan to die,” I mumble aloud.

*Who is this Alice? What does she want from you? Aren’t you suspicious?*

“Of course I’m suspicious, but what else am I meant to do?”

*You can have a purpose now. The humans are nasty, greedy creatures. You've seen it first-hand. You could set them free.*

*"I'm not a killer."*

*Kill the entire city. You could if you wanted. Right now. Go outside. One foot after another.*

*"I've never killed before."*

*It's never too late to start.*

.....

I blink away crust from around my eyes. Objects come into sharp focus. I sit upright and stretch my whole body. The frail skeletal version of me is long gone and in its place a heavier, more muscular, stronger me. I pat my stomach, my arms, my thighs, gladly grabbing at my new-found body weight. The sound of a roaring motorbike alerts me that I'm alone in here. I nervously pull back the thin, white curtain and eye her suit of armour as she dismounts the bike with elegance.

Metal screeches as she bursts through the door and dumps herself on the couch. She throws a leather bag on the coffee table and unzips it. Without a single word, she begins unpacking. Robotically, one by one, she pulls out its contents. A semi-automatic laser gun, a plasma shotgun, a UV pistol, a melding knife, an assault vest, and water grenades. She then reaches into a smaller zip within the bag and pulls out a square, flat item wrapped in tin foil and holds it out to me.

*"What is this?" I say, bewildered.*

*The pitch of her voice heightens. "Chocolate."*

I stare at the rough tinfoil, motionless in the middle of the coffee table. I look to Alice, and back to the chocolate. I've heard about this delicacy in movies, but never seen it in real life. The tin foil is cold, loud, and crumpley. Picking it up feels wrong, will she swat it out of my hands? She gestures to me, a soft, reassuring nod that soothes away my worries. Corner by corner, I pull apart

the foil, revealing a chestnut square. It's flat with grooved corners and a smooth surface. I bring the chocolate to my mouth, inhaling its decadent smell. I crank open my mouth and nibble on the corner. As the taste hits the end of my tongue, my body feels an inexplicable tingle. I throw myself at the remaining chocolate ravenously. My eyes light up and my mouth waters. I let it sit covered in my saliva, savouring the sugary sweetness.

"The best gifts are the smallest." She points to a tiny translucent earpiece on the coffee table. "This is a satellite radio. If we ever get separated, use it." Her thick, armoured hands swoop in and cup the radio, holding it out to me.

I nod and put the device in my ear. It moulds to my ear shape and camouflages itself flesh toned.

"Here, these clothes will be much more resistant."

I nearly topple over as I catch the thick vest and suit. I slip down the corridor into the bathroom and remove my white shirt and black shorts. As I zip the front, it clings to my skin and forces my posture upright. I stare at myself in the mirror. My blackened, hazelnut eyes stare back. I touch the rough surface of the barcode tattoo that irrevocably brands me property of G.R.A.Z.I.A.

"This is the last time that you will be who you've always been."

"Did you say something?" says Alice.

I rub my hands together and slink over to the bathroom door. "Nothing."

Alice yells from the lounge, "The suit has a lot of functionality. In water, it will keep you dry. In extreme cold, it will keep you warm, and vice versa. The material is flame retardant and laser proof; the assault vest can protect against some plasma guns, but it should feel lightweight," she says.

I skip to the couch and grin. "A bit quieter than you, eh?" I reply.



She leans against her knees and stares at the floor. Ruminating. "You'll need this," she says, passing me what looks like the crown of a back tooth, keeping her head arched away.

"What is this?" I ask, staring at her blank helmet. Focussing in on the tiny camera holes that look like eyes.

"The backup plan. If everything goes to hell, take it off and chew it open," she gestures to her throat.

"And?" I gulp.

"And...no more."

"Right." I stare blankly at the pile of guns on the coffee table, unable to blink. "I'm not sure I quite understand what's happening here."

"Beth sent me to make sure you never go back to G.R.A.Z.I.A. Alive or dead."

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FENRIR

Chapter 22: Questions are for the Living

---

The desert sun scorches me. Nose cracks into canyons. Flakes of skin gather in the corners of my eyes. My body swells and stiffens, a wolf without joints. If I could even feel half their pain—

*I'll forgive you while you war. So your heart stays strong.*

Luria won't forgive me, not now.

My army's footsteps at the East Cape gate are imprinted into the sand like fossils. Overlapping each other. Unafraid of the wind. My legs tremble as I step over them. They must remain there. Untouched. Preserved.

Fox told me not to go.

*Sorry Fen. Taking the Cape is suicide. Reconsider Diz's plan, and you just might live.*

I'm inside. The city makes no sound. The crammed together high-rise buildings don't creak. It happened in a flash. Cut my sight. There was no smell. Nothing for my ears. Not until I heard them scream.

I stand still. Eyes closed, but I can smell rust. Would Chrysos let this be? Does God exist? There is no Moonland. No paradise of endless freedom. They're not waiting for me there.

Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm—

Eyes still closed. The hunting knife, freshly sharpened. I shove it into my thigh. Holed. Crunched bones. Veins slit two ways. Muscles folded open. I am here. This is real.

My limping leg takes me into the city centre, where bodies form piles. Frozen arms, legs, snouts, limply stacked on top of each other.

Kredo's voice echoes in my head. *The Commander doesn't lead the pack.*

But I led you here.

Black spots weaken my vision. Dust or dirt or my fading consciousness. There's a human body stiff on its chair. Neck dangling on her chest. A wet e-cigarette, still hot. My pant leg is completely red. I push the knife in deeper.

She's only five at the oldest. Her eyelashes shiver. Her chest inflates. Only once.

Civilians. Mothers. Sons. Daughters. Fathers... friends. An entire city. What's it all for?

The Tower grows taller as I get closer.

*Kredo, Command Three, infiltrate the Tower.*

He did it. Because I told him to.

They did it. Because I told them to.

The Tower looks down at me. Casting long, dark shadows. The door to the tower is blasted open. Charred. Flat on the ground next to the body of a guard. His head full of holes. His G.R.A.Z.I.A. name tag splattered with his own blood.

*All commands RETREAT!*

There wasn't enough time.

"I did what Roth said. He has my family," the guard told me. Only after I'd squeezed his neck faint.

"What about their families?"

"I'm sorry." Eyes bulge from his face, his lips ashen.

But I let him go free. Because I am weak. Worthless.

Someone's son at the bottom of the tower. His breaths shallow.

"I'm... glad, I was part of Command Three." He opens his mouth. Blood drips through his canines. "A-A clansmen... leading the army." He grips at his shattered bones. "Father would be so proud."

His words like cement. That is why we are all here. To impress our long dead fathers.

My paw wraps around his. "The people of Vivé will be proud."

His body loses tension.

"They won't be." Her bloodshot green eyes look my way. She spits up metal. "They'll hate us."

"Can you walk?"

"I'm already dead." She reveals the bruise the size of her torso. Her organs swelling inside.

"Don't tell my mother you saw me whimpering here. Tell her I died instantly."

"I promise." I reach for her hand.

She pushes me away weakly. "Get the fuck outta here. You lived. Now go live." She smells like living rot.

The noise. A groan. His smell. His growl.

I forget my wound. Sprint. The stairs behind me. The top of the Tower. Please.

A wolf body. Heaving fast. Sharp breaths. Deflated ribcage. Weaponless. Open mouth. Foamed. Drool. Dirt red fur.

"You can't." His heart has my paws. Smashing on his chest. But it isn't the heart. It's the emptiness within his torso. The deflated blood pressure. "Don't leave."

He grunts. His eyes roll and roll until they're sheened like cold marble.

"I can't go back without you!" I slam his chest once more.

The beating heart stops.

My body crumbles on top of his. "Kredo..."

His son won't see his father. Ever again.

I have to leave. Their hopes and dreams. Their memories. I'm the only one that can return them to Vivé.

Luria waits at the teleporter. She moves before I can vomit. Rubs my back.

"Your leg!" She hovers over the knife. "We need to get you to a doctor!"

I collapse in her arms. "They're all dead."

"What?" Her voice cracks.

“Everyone, the clansmen, the army. All dead.”

She pushes me away. “Speak sense! What the hell happened?” she cries.

The long silence answers her question.

She grips my wrists. “I told you not to trust George.”

Her voice is muffled, and my brain isn’t connecting with my body. There are words on my tongue. I don’t know if I said them.

I forgot I was at war with humans.

My leg pangs to remind me of lost blood. Vivé and Luria’s face dissolve into blackness. I withdraw into my mind. In that busy space, his words echo louder than the rest,

*As a warrior, you’re honour-bound to own your mistakes, no matter what atrocities you must admit.*

Even if I ended the Kwewu?

Father?

Questions are for the living.

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**SKAR**

**Chapter 23: Slaves to Lies**

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Armoured G.R.A.Z.I.A. guards shove me into the road. They rip people from their homes and businesses. Some Kwewu empty their lungs with desperate screams, some let their tears shower the pavement. The ones from the jail sharpen their teeth as they're marched out. A soldier shoves his plasma gun into my face as he marches down the sprawling line of terrified wolves.

Luc and Granma are back at home. My muscles cramp, turning my neck into hard stone. "Please," I beg one of the guards. "I need to find my family. We'll go peacefully, I promise."

The guard crushes the end of his gun against my snout. He throws me further down the line. The loudspeakers on the streets chant snippets and clues. "East Cape... attacked... Kwewu army... send you to the wall..."

I drag my feet, eyes on the ground, watching us march in sync. Families split up by the blunt end of a loaded gun. Children younger than Luc waddle through the crowd with pale faces. I examine the tail of each one in case I find him.

"What does your brother look like?" comes a high-pitched voice the humans can't hear.

"Grey fur with a white patch on the tip of his tail, he's only ten." I smell the source of the voice. A girl with long brown fur, two rows from mine.

"If I see him, I'll call to you." She tucks her head down. Hands electric cuffed in place. I know that feeling. She slides ahead, darting between taller people and sniffing discreetly from the centre of the dense crowd. I lose sight of her but keep track of her scent.

Chrysos, I've never asked you for a thing, but if you do exist... please let Luc be ok.

The guards lead us out of the capital and outside of the Boonshield, into the desert. This is my first experience with the sun. First, warmth. Later, skin cracks into pieces, pain I've never felt before. No teleporter or aircraft to get us there. My feet burst open into bloody blisters. It's like walking on rocks. The smell of urine, faeces and bleach singes my nose hair. A rancid mix of fear and pheromones.

After a few long hours, an elderly man drops to the ground. Exhausted. A guard locks on the man lying on the ground, in between consciousness. A man as old as Granma. He spots two others hold the line to try and lift the elderly man up. He helps by shoving his steel boot into the old man's kidney.

"Get up." The guard spits.

The man whimpers, dry retches and clasps his aching side. His feet are so worn, a knob of bone bursts through the pad.

"Oh well." The guard shoots him. In the temple. Boots him in the face, just to be sure. I listen in the air for his heartbeat. Dead...

"You want to eat lead too?" The guard stares at the two helpers, who return to their spot in line.

Shot down for being tired... Luc's done more than that on a good day.

We continue marching forward, stepping over the body. Someone's grandfather, someone's son, stepped over like half-chewed gum on the sidewalk. Imagine if that were Granma... no, I can't bear to think about it. Just keep going, don't make eye contact with anyone, keep the pace, ignore the pain, think about seeing Luc once more.

We continue to walk as the blue sky turns into a black canvas. Our path lit by the scopes on the G.R.A.Z.I.A. guns. We yowl in high-pitched cries. Cries the humans will never know. Mourning the



losses as more drop off and are put 'out of our misery' by the guards. A long harmonic howl that lasts until dawn.

Luc will be ok. He will. He's got Granma's strength and Granpa's persistence. Nothing can beat that. Not even G.R.A.Z.I.A.

We arrive at North Cape. Protected by the wall, a mesh of pixels like a Boonshield. A hazy red stream of light that goes too high to see where it ends. Enter without permission and a jolt stops your heart in an instant. North Cape was out of bounds for civilians, but that didn't keep people from camping outside it and talking about it. Granma told us aliens landed there, and their ship was still stuck in the ground. G.R.A.Z.I.A. couldn't work out how to get it out so they closed off the whole cape.

We all halt as instructed while the guards prepare the entrance to the wall.

I scan the large crowd. Nose open. Ears wide. In search of his dirt smell and bouncy footsteps. I slide between the trembling and stiff people, brushing my fur against theirs. Body depleted of energy, sounds and smells jumble together. Broken skin, bloodied bone, fur matted with urine.

I have no choice. "Luc, Luc." I growl in a low tone. "It's me, Luc, can you hear me?"

"Skar!" He hops through the crowd of wolf legs, slams into me and wraps his whole body around my paw. "I was so scared, but she held my paw." He motions to someone. The girl with long brown fur follows behind him. She smiles at me.

"Thank you," I say looking into her eyes. Brown with rivers of gold pouring into the pupil. She's braver than me.

"Meri said after they killed someone, she was too scared to find you," says Luc.

"You kept my brother safe; I owe you."

“Not at all,” says Meri.

“Where’s Granma?”

Luc lets go of me and his mouth sours. His eyes well and he throws his paws in front of his face. “They...” He trails off.

Meri wraps her arms around Luc. “She didn’t make it. I’m so sorry,” she whispers, paws over her heart.

I clench my jaw. I didn’t say goodbye. She died alone. She won’t rock Luc to sleep again. She won’t tell us outrageous war stories about Ma and Pa, or laugh so hard at wolf trivia she spits out her healing tea. She won’t do anything anymore.

“I should’ve been there.” My chest feels hollow. But what would I have done? That guard shot the old man in the head, without a second thought. She’d be dead either way.

“She told ‘em, Skar.” Luc sniffs back his last tear and waves his fist. “Before she died, she told ‘em.”

I smile. “That’s how I imagined she’d go.” I pause, holding back tears.

The guards halt us to attention. Venom in their eyes. Meri stands straight, still cuffed, and Luc faces them, stiff as a robot. He’s never listened before.

“The wall’s open, kiss this land goodbye,” says one of the leading guards. “Welcome to your new home. You’ll be staying here till your army surrenders. You go where we say you go.”

I walk toward the opening in the wall, Meri at one side, Luc at the other. We keep our gaze low, heads down, and stay close.

A guard squeezes Luc’s arm and rips him out of the crowd.

“No, what’re you doing?” I yell.

The guard slams his steel cap boot into my shin. I fall into Meri and yelp in pain.

“Speak when spoken to, dog.”

“Skar! Help me! Don’t let them take me,” Luc wails, kicking his arms and legs in chaotic unison.

The guard rams him on the head with a sickening crack and flings Luc over his shoulder. His lip hangs loose.

I see the guard’s laser. Aimed between my eyes. A mercy bullet. I want them to pull my lungs up my throat and deflate them on my canines. Wipe away the memories steaming me flat into the dirt. Flush my nose of the putrid blasts of the living decayed. Shut my scarred, bloodshot eyes, forever.

Meri shoves her elbow into my side and gestures me to follow her. I see only the whites of Luc’s eyes as the distance chasms between us.

All I can do is stare. What kind of brother am I?

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**BETH**

**Chapter 24: Growth**

---

Ellbray is still asleep, inside the door this time but still nowhere near my bed. I look around the room, hoping today is the last day I see its every shade of blue. Hoping I see a real skyline soon. Ellbray has been diligently attending council meetings with the other scum of G.R.A.Z.I.A. and feeding me information. An attack on East Cape launched by the Vivé army, supposedly all civilians slaughtered. Roth couldn't keep the secret long from his confidants though, he had to boast of his genius scheming from afar. He bragged to Ellbray about how he'd made Vice-President George send his entire army into a trap. Extinction drones killed the entire population and the army without harming his precious city. He forgot to mention I was the one who invented and built the first drones. Now he has a great excuse to attack the Kwewu, to get rid of the threat to his throne, so with that he's sent all the Kwewu to the North. A land that is to be mined, plucked, pulled, and rooted until it's desolate like the rest of the West. A simple slaughter would be more humane. He will run those Kwewu until they are raw, deflated, and begging for their own deaths. But they have an important role in all this. We made them for a purpose.

"Ellbray, it's time," I say in a low tone.

She opens one eye.

"Call Roth, say it's urgent, something about the baby, and he needs to come in person. And whatever you do, do not come back here."

She opens the other eye.

"We can't have him thinking you're part of this plan."

She stretches and leaves the room.

I pace back and forth, unaware of how many minutes or hours have passed. My stomach feels like rocks, clanging together, scraping bits off each other. Every outcome of this scenario plays out in my head, but it always ends the same.

My door opens. No sheen of projection. It looks like Roth in the flesh. He's wearing his slimming auburn suit and gold-studded tie. That means he was parading himself in front of wealthy beneficiaries, and this disruption won't be welcome.

He adjusts his tie and slams the door. "This better be as urgent as your little dog made out. I have important clients waiting." He undoes his cufflinks and rolls up his sleeves.

I place two hands over my stomach and swallow the giant lump of saliva building at the back of my throat. My hands clam up. Each breath feels stunted. "It's about your child."

"My child all of a sudden, is it?" He walks a step closer. "I can tell by your scrunched-up face something's wrong. What's the problem?"

"The baby you wanted so bad. To carry your legacy."

"Get on with it, woman." He inches closer.

"To replace the hole left by your father."

"Do I have to bring you another capsule?" He rummages in his blazer pocket. "I'm sure I have one with me. Did you like that last one?"

"Your last hope to keep hold of the Capital."

He steps forward once more and places his hand around my neck.

"I can squeeze harder. Give me reason to."

"The child you put all your energy and hopes into," I force the words out against his grip.

His lip quivers. He looks into my eyes. His bulge from their sockets. Dots of sweat line his eyebrows. He grips my wrist with his other hand, tightening slowly.

“Is dead.”

His teeth crush together. “Lies... you fucking—” his throat growls like chainsaws. He presses his earpiece. “Henley. Beth’s. Now.” He pries his hand from my throat and throws me on the bed. “This better be a stunt, Beth, this fucking better be!”

Roth yells insults at me. Hitting cabinets and tables and walls, throwing chairs, and knocking over nightstands. Chaos. Battering and destroying everything except me. His fists clench, that vein behind his ear pulsates, but he keeps himself from me for long enough. Dr Henley arrives with his gear and runs some blood tests, listens on his magnoscope; the usual. We share a short moment of eye contact.

He bites his lip and looks down at his wrinkled hands. “I’m afraid—” he starts.

“Get out,” Roth says.

“S-sir.”

“OUT!” he screams.

Dr Henley gathers his things and scurries out the door. Cowards are predictable.

“You.” Roth sets his laser eyes on me.

He grabs my arms. Hands like hot tar. He throws me off the bed and slams his steel-cap boot into my stomach. Pain sears. Rumbles against my bones. Crunch. Another hit. Another. A warmth disperses inside. My organs split.

“A sour, vile woman. Nothing can grow near you! NOTHING! You hear me?” Roth laughs. A crazed, lost laugh, his mind disconnected from his body.

My body spasms. Blood leaks from veins and capillaries, maybe arteries, into the caverns where it will swell. The nanomachines will patch the holes inside but they can't drain the blood. God, I wish the pain relief would kick in. My breaths come shallow and wheezy. Fragments of rib must be lodged in my lung.

"You kill everything around you!" He slams a fist into my face. Maybe just a bruise, maybe a broken eye socket. I'm not sure.

He holds a knife in his shaking fist. A laser he could plunge into any part of me. I wait, but he just stands there. Gripping it tight. Holding it before my flesh. He looks at me for a moment as blood drips from my cut lip.

He throws the laser to one side.

"I won't stay near you a moment longer. Go back to that underground cage and do your experiments. As far away from me as you can be." He spits on me. "Death would be a mercy."

He kicks me once more and storms out the door, locking it behind him.

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**FENRIR**

**Chapter 25: Falling City**

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I wanted to let the wound fester. Gape and brim with bacteria. But Luria's love wouldn't allow it. She clipped the gash shut and the capsule she gave me did the rest. She left the knife in the bathroom, still covered in my blood. I'm tempted to use it again.

Only a few hours had passed since I'd dragged myself back to Vivé from East Cape.

"You have to tell them what happened. It was his fault, not yours." Fox slips out from behind my bedroom door. He and Luria had been whispering in the lounge. "You can still use George to win this war."

I look into Luria's watery eyes. Hands clutched together as if she's about to beg.

"Luria told you what happened... and you don't hate me?" I say.

"Not yet." Fox's eyes crackle with flames. "Kidnap Lilly. Get George on side."

I stare at him blankly. "She's locked down, there's no way—"

Fox beckons me out of my room and into the streets. Luria follows silently behind. He takes us to the wolf statue. It stares at me for a long moment. A blonde blur whips past. A human smell, thick with sugar.

"Lilly roams free, unlike many of us. You see, George expected you all to die out there. He must be devastated that you survived."

I doubt anyone knows I'm still alive.

"Look at her, running about the town as if she owns it," he says, pointing to Lilly off in the distance.



She skips and weaves between our children. Careless of George. I clench my fists.

“She’s our only option,” says Fox.

Lilly forms shapes with her hands. “On Earth, they had wolves that looked like cats! With orange and black stripes, they’d go...” She releases an unidentifiable roar. “They didn’t like to sleep at night, so the lazy kitties napped all day instead.” Stories bounce from her mouth to our unattended children.

Fox stares at her. “We have no other choice.”

George is at the corner of his window, safe behind the metal and glass he’s built above Vivé.

I approach the protesters. The last of my people left alive in Vivé. My throat clamps down. My chest aches. I must push through. Breathe in the air and say the words. “Our army marched to East Cape where extinction drones killed them all. Your loved ones.” The protesters lower their signs and hush to a sudden silence. Ears at attention to my every word. “A trap planned long before our arrival. I led the army there, that is my burden to bear, but you left us blind. You sent us to die.” I spit my words in George’s direction. “G.R.A.Z.I.A. killed the civilians of East Cape in the cross-fire without hesitation. Their own people!”

The looks I receive from the protesters make me want to crumble into nothingness. Reverse my existence. But they need the truth. “Your leader murders us in the East and the Capital, now you murder us in the South.” I release an aching howl into the sky. My people answer in pitted barks stricken with grief. “In our home.” The protesters clench tight around me. G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldiers multiply at George’s gates. “If I get my teeth around your neck,” I fixate on George, “I’ll tear it apart! You hear me?”

I wade through the crowd and turn to my people. Packs fixate on me, eyes narrowed. “George is the reason your family and friends are dead!” I yell to the crowd. Their pupils dilate, ears flatten to their heads, the smell heavy. They ram the gates.

Lilly splashes water from the fountain, wetting the children's fur. A gentle gesture.

"Lilly?" I run my claws through the fountain and flick droplets at her.

She shakes her head. "That's me!" Her smile the shape of a half-moon. "Oh, it's you Mr Fenrir. I snuck out the house again." She raises a finger to her mouth. "Don't tell Dad."

"What did I tell you about coming out here?"

She frowns.

"Will you come with me?"

"Yup!" she takes my paw, like someone who's never been betrayed. I lead her through the crowd. Some sneer and growl. I hush them with a show of my black gums.

"You leave your daughter out here amongst wolves who hate your family as much as they hate you," I snarl.

George sees her and spits out his drink. He shoves two clammy hands against his window and taps his earpiece frantically.

"Don't worry, George. We're not callous like you. We're not the dogs G.R.A.Z.I.A. says we are." The crowd at my back howl and bare their teeth. "We don't hurt children!" I say.

I push Lilly through the gate. A tiny life, small enough to slip through the bars. "You'd best stay in there for now." I whisper, "Some people out here want to hurt you."

"Thanks a bunch, Mr Fenrir." Reaching a little hand through the bars to brush my mane. She hurries to George and his bodyguards. He whisks her into the manse.

I turn back to my followers, throwing my arm in the air. "We will win this without compromising our humanity." I snap toward George, who's back behind the safety of his window.

“George, get your children out, these gates are weak, and I will not stop my people enacting justice. No-one can save you.”

Claws dig into my shoulder and drag me away from the protesters. George’s guards take aim on the other side.

“This is the last time I rescue a fool.” Fox shoves me down an alleyway, shoots Luria an intense look, and disappears in a flash of red.

Luria weaves her arm around mine. “Roth is sending his army here. That’s why Fox wanted you to kidnap Lilly. Fen, there’s no way we can hold up against G.R.A.Z.I.A.’s full force.”

Bullets and casings hitting the pavement ring in my ears. The sad yelps of injured wolves pull at the bottom of my stomach. “I had to give them anger. Otherwise, all they’d have is pain.”

“We have to leave.”

Luria takes me down the alley, my arms and legs numb. I pass civilians crawling in the streets and the remains of the Vivé army defending them. Drones fill the air. Marching metal pounds loud against the silver cobblestone.

She stops, taking a moment’s breath. “You shouldn’t have gone out there and said all those things, Fen. You’ve started a riot.”

“I’m sorry,” I whimper. I’ve made every mistake a leader can make. I’m glad my father’s dead.

Carnage. Sneaking by G.R.A.Z.I.A. guards and leaping out of drone vision. We walk the short distance to the war council room. I smash down the locked door and hoist Luria over the broken shards of wood. The code, what was it again? I kneel by the fake fireplace and turn off the holographic flame. I rip out the pieces of plastic wood and push the bits of straw to one side. The

metal latch appears. I enter the code. Incorrect. I try again. Incorrect. Luria stares at me with wide, watery eyes. She kneels and punches in the code. Correct.

“How did you know the code?”

“Fox told me.” We share a painful look. “He didn’t think you’d be coming back.” She points to the escape passage. “If we go now, we might live.”

I pull Luria against my thumping chest and run my claws through her thick hair, softly stroking her.

“What about my people out there?”

She lifts her head from my chest and looks at me with her bright bubbly eyes. “They’ll die, my love.”

“While I cower?” My lip quivers. “I’ve let enough people die!”

“You can hardly lead an army if you’re dead.”

“The army is dead. These are civilians!”

She runs her hand along my hot cheek. “The prisoners of the North Cape will stand at your side.”

“My father said Vivé would be the land of the Kwewu. He was wrong.”

“We have to go now, my love.” Her eyes and her warmth lure me in. I’ve never said no to her.

I flip open the latch and help her down the ladder. We tread underground, in the deep caverns of the old sewage system. Walls black, graffitied, luminescent lights buzzing their last buzz. Flickering golden yellow that fade to darkness, waiting to be replaced by another. I follow her, claw in claw as she leads me in directions I can barely comprehend. My stab wound throbs. Flashes of

death remind me of my cowardice. Kredo. Fox and Verd sentenced to death because I wouldn't listen. Of course George betrayed us, of course he told Roth the truth. He'll do anything to protect Lilly. But he doesn't know I'll do anything to protect Luria, and when I find him one night, long in the future, sleeping comfortably in his bed, I'll strangle the life out of him while Lilly watches. The last thing he'll see is her crying eyes. And then I'll lie comfortably in his bed, Luria at my side, and we'll rule the world together. Maybe we'll finally have a child, another to treasure too.

Luria stops, our feet damp with thick garbage water. I snap out of my daydream. We've come to a dead end, dimly lit with a light that sounds like static. Underneath it, I can make out red fur. It's holding something. *Click*. It hits me in the chest. I feel it, electricity, disabling my nerves. I drop to the wet ground, frozen. Luria kneels next to me and rests her hand against my arm. I can barely feel her.

"It's only a tranq. I'm sorry, Fen." Fox kneels next to her and rubs her back. "I told you what would happen. I warned you, but you never listen. You can't see past your prestigious Alpha upbringing, your honourable father, your heritage."

I pull my hand against Luria's soft cheek. "Why?" I push out through heavy, deflating breaths.

"Verd wanted you dead, ranting that you were the third false leader, that you had to die to bring about the true leader. Fox promised that you'd live this way." She rubs my forehead. "George will take you captive to bring Lees and Ellbray back into the fold."

Fox gets to his feet, a smirk on his face so wide, I know the truth.

"He's right, this is the only way, Fenrir." Luria says my name with formality. Long and drawn. Her eyes glisten as she stares at Fox. The way she once looked at me.

"You love him," I whisper.

Fox pulls out a plasma gun and aims it at my head. Luria's eyes widen and she throws herself in front of me.

"You promised! Fox, no! This wasn't the plan."

"Luria." Fox gives her a grim glance. "If I let him live, he'll hunt me down."

"No," she begs, tears rolling down her cheeks. "You can't!" she begs.

I try to reach out to her. She's too far away.

"Move, Luria."

"Fox, please, stop. Please don't kill him." She stands and pulls him in by the waist, his body against hers. She sniffs. "He's your best friend."

"He's right," I gasp. "I'd hunt him down forever until the moment I split him in two."

She leans down, kisses me on the cheek and nods, wiping the wetness from her sweet face.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers.

Fox lifts her up and pulls her head against his chest with his free hand and pets her. Her body unclenches.

*Bang.*

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**SKAR**

**Chapter 26: Middle of Nothing**

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Three long weeks have dragged by since I saw Luc last.

The orange globe in the sky sings the desert sand. Hot coals against my bare feet. Sixteen years under the Boonshield didn't build me much resilience. My grey fur dampens after a few hours. I smell like mould and mothballs. My strong, canine arms and back muscles last a good eight hours, but my gangly, thin human leg muscles wobble like rubber bands by the end of my shift. G.R.A.Z.I.A. had made it simple: build an object following a strict plan or be sent to the mines. I volunteered to build but the shade of the mine might have been a better option. My tent is shadowed by the wall, chilly at night but during the day the darkness always looks so enticing.

The sun hits the horizon, a half-circle, spitting out pink light. An armoured watcher flicks a searing baton against my ankle. I'd been too busy watching the sun to work.

"Oi, dog, get on with it!"

"It's Skar," I whisper meekly. The soldier doesn't hear me.

I work well into the night. The first time my night-vision seems useful. I return when the watcher grows tired. I yawn, letting out a tiny squeak and growl, and wrap myself in a ball, white tail atop my head.

The alarm shocks me awake. I wipe drool against my tail and sprawl out of my tent. The guards have gathered and are leading us like slaves to the front of the wall. The air smells like iron and rot. I whine and follow the others, keeping my head low and teeth well hidden from the guards. They march everyone near the crossroads, where the teleporter and station guard sit. Every guard aims their guns at us and yells, "Turn!" I do as I'm told.

We mask our gasps and stand as still as possible. Two elderly Kwewu are pinned to the wall, branded like cattle with the word 'Escapists'.

The watcher who has taken a liking to whipping me stands at the front of the group. His shiny black armour etched with G.R.A.Z.I.A. in red text reflects the sun and blinds me for a moment. Armour that insulates and prevents sun damage. He's probably never been too hot or too cold in his short human life. He paces at the head of the crowd. All of us stand with straight backs and closed snouts, no-one makes eye contact with him. He flips and twirls his gun in his hands, pretends to aim it at a few with a smirk.

"Why do you think these Kwewu are dead?" he stops in front of a boy, whose black fur looks increasingly damp. "This is what happens when you flee the wall. Torture, and then death. Don't get any more ideas. You're all just bodies to us."

A child, maybe three years younger than me, drops to his knees. Tears well under his small yellow eyes. He sobs and crawls towards the two elderly bodies. Reaches his paw out in the air.

"Chrysos!" he cries.

The guard plants his steel cap boot in the child's tiny gut.

"We don't speak of your false Gods here."

"My grandparents... please, Sir, please, let me give them gold so their souls can travel to the Moonlands."

"And where might you have gotten your hands on gold?"

The kid drops to the floor and clasps his paws together in prayer. His back arches and convulses as his tears evaporate on the scorching sand.

"These bodies will stay here and rot in the sun as a reminder to you all. When the smell reaches your tents, you'll remember what happens to escapists." His elbow dives into the small of



the child's back, leaving him flat and splayed on the ground. The watcher kneels before him. "Let this serve as a reminder about talking out of turn." He grabs the end of the boy's tail and uses a searing knife to cut cleanly through the fur, skin, and bone, soldering the wound shut in one fell swoop. Not that it does much for the pain. The kid howls and cries. Other guards drag him off behind the wall. Probably into the soundproof cells. Cells so quiet you can hear your cardiovascular system ticking in rhythm. Two weeks in there was enough to drive us to suicide. Greater men would have protected the boy, but here we all stand, protecting only ourselves.

We march solemnly, letting out high pitched yowls under our breath. Pitches so high, human ears can't detect them. A quiet ceremony for the dead, and a mark of solidarity for the boy who lost his tail. My stomach sickens as the sun boils the corpses hung on the wall. We're whipped as we re-enter North Cape. Many whisper Chrysos' prayer: 'When the moons fade, they are still in the sky, as you will be too. For it is my heart and memories that keep you there.' The watcher finds me and shoves me into the dirt.

"Go weld some metal."

I do as I'm told and cut the metal with my claws before piecing it into the construction. Hacking and putting things together is second nature, automatic. We smell death before it comes, we hear danger as it brews, and see predators in the black of night. Their machines give them strength, not their bodies. Yet, the humans have beaten our will to death. Our minds are weak. The God Wolf sits in the comfort of stone stillness in Vivé as humans live happy lives in our homes.

I flash a look at Verd. A man who came here voluntarily, calling it a haven the Kwewu needed, a place of order. He spent a week in the quiet room on arrival as a reward. He walks over and helps me lift the piece of metal.

"Verd! I'm glad you're alive." I grin.

"As am I."

"I can't watch this any longer," I mutter to myself.

"They keep us safe from the God Wolf's sins, my dear. I've lived many years with free Kwewu. Here, I see crime no more. The humans are saviours. That child and his grandparents were sinners."

I pause for a moment, unsure how to answer his madness.

"I have seen it clear now. So have Dos, Lunar, and Erri. We see that we are lucky. They have taken us away from our folly. Chrysos is greedy. The stories passed down are lies to cover the greed, child, you'd be wise to remember that."

"Do you believe that all this pain and suffering is okay?"

"What pain and suffering, child? We mine and build, eat and sleep, wake and live. You know nothing of suffering. In Vivé, there were pack wars for years, silly young brooding wolves who wanted to rule. No, now we have no Alpha, the guards keep us grounded, and we keep each other in check. This is peace."

"Haven't you heard about Diz? She wants to rescue us without death."

"That robot-human abomination could not and should not lead the Kwewu."

"I won't watch another kid cut down before us."

"Child, I like you, I know what you are thinking to do. If you cause discord, I will stop you. Look to that woman over there." He points to a woman he came here with. She cries all day, every day, through the heat, even as she works or gets whipped for it. "The price of freedom. Her sins caught up with her and she lost someone she loved. Is this the kind of freedom you desire? The freedom to cause yourself pain?"

I walk over to the woman and kneel to her level. She sniffs but continues to wail. I reach out to her. "What is your name?"

She lets tears run down her face and slip onto the desert sand, drying instantly. "Luria," she whispers through a cracked voice.

"I need to ask you something. Would you rather be here, imprisoned, or free to suffer the pain you suffer now?"

"I would do anything to take it back." She grabs my arm. "Imprisoned or otherwise! He didn't deserve to die!"

"Hey! What're you doing, boy? Get off her." A man with crimson fur pulls her away from me. He holds her against himself tightly and lets her cry into his chest.

"Fox, do not be on guard. He was merely asking her a question of her freedom. Whether she misses it or not."

"Quiet, fool, it's your words that lost us our freedom." Fox faces me. "Never trust a thing that man says, he cares nothing for sanity."

I leave them alone and continue with the build. Looking at the others who are ahead of me, it looks like we're creating pods which have piping that leads to one main point. The central area, still being built, almost resembles a furnace. As the day grows long, a watcher informs me a slave fainted in the mines and demands I replace them. He shoves me there with the end of his gun and throws me into sudden darkness. I was wrong about the mines; they may be sheltered from the sun, but the humidity and suffocation are hard to stand. I take a drill-pick and find the dark material. Humans call it Galacktite, a rare mineral that can be channelled into energy. Hitting at it, it seems incredibly dense, almost unbreakable. The others next to me have glazed eyes and arms that move as if separate from their bodies. Throwing their drill-picks at rocks with no energy left. Another guard brings round the daily half-capsule. Not all are made equal, the guards cut the capsules up by hand and some are completely empty while others have all the powder in one side. A lottery if you get to

eat. Mine is full, thankfully. Even so, they are flavourless, so it's hard to imagine what nutrients they provide.

"You ain't done yet, dog," the watcher yells.

I get back to mining, but I can feel a tearing sensation in my back muscles. Like a twig snapping underfoot, my body is breaking.

"I'm sorry about before," a voice whispers from the darkness.

At the corner of my eye, I can see his reddish-brown fur. It's Fox. "No harm done."

"Luria and I escaped Vivé. We thought Verd was taking us somewhere safe, to a hideout, but he lied to us and led us right into a trap. Rambling about how we could repent here and live true and wholesome lives under the guard of the humans. I did some horrible things to get out of Vivé and all for what? To become a slave like the rest."

"My brother Luc was taken somewhere else. I might never see him again."

"You understand my pain, then." Fox hits a rock for good measure. "Verd and his followers might try to stop us, but would you be against trying to escape?"

I thought about it for a few moments. If I leave, I might be able to find Luc. But Meri is here, and I can't leave her either. Not after she protected Luc. "I'll think about it."

"Oi!" A grumbling shout. A G.R.A.Z.I.A. guard, luckily not the watcher, storms in after noticing our work has ceased. "Get on with it!" he spits at me and points to a set of completely mined rocks. No Galacktite in sight. I move to the correct position and mine the rock.

"You know they can't see it, right?" says Fox.

"Huh?"

"The humans, they can't see the Galacktite."

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ELLBRAY

Chapter 27: Arrival

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Roth told me to wait in his office. It's been an hour. The Floating city looks dim today, even though it's impossible as the Boonshield regulates the light. While the office is decorated and adorned with obsessively shined gems, it still feels empty. There are communication devices in the room, but none of them ring while he's gone. His computer is stowed in a flap on the desk, and it looks as if it's been there awhile. The drawers are sparse, with only cleaning cloths and small service robots inside. No-one knocks on his door, not even Mansyl and Saed. It seems obvious to me: Roth chooses his interactions, they don't choose him. The emptiness quashes my hope to find evidence. A trail that he murdered Trudo and Ren. In our time together, he'd been clear that he didn't do it, and promised to find out who did. I've waited too many years. Listened to too many of his speeches, rants, and orders. This is it. My chance. When he comes in that door, he'll have my claw at his neck, and the truth better come out of his mouth.

The door slides open. Roth pushes his way through, wild hair and a crinkled suit. His face deep with wrinkles, and frown to match, he pushes past me.

"Sir?" I say.

I follow him as he kicks his chair out from behind his desk. His skin so thin and fragile. Does he care about his life enough to tell me the truth? He dumps himself in his leather chair and pours his brandy to the rim. Slugs it back. Pours another. His body more tense than usual.

"Sir, what happened?" Just a little closer. He's too distracted. He'll think nothing of it. One nick could get him talking.

He rips off all his rings and throws his blazer to one side. "There has to be another way to keep the people's faith."

His eyes never look my way. I can smell it. Blood on his hands. Bruises coming to the surface of his fists. The scent of fluid on smoked human skin, this is him for sure. It is not a projection.

“My father couldn’t have smelt the disdain even if someone threw it in his face. Wealth without poverty. It’s meaningless!” He slams a fist against his desk. “The nature of clones...lifespans half our own, and the next generation, a lifespan halved again. We are a species destined to die out. Unlike you virile beasts.”

I become aware of my wolf ears and snout. “Is the baby okay, Sir?”

He snorts. “I’m sure Beth’s wormed her way into your tiny dog brain by now. Mothers attract such unfounded empathy.”

I keep my composure. “Is she okay, Sir?”

“I wish I’d killed her.” He moves in front of me and stares me in the eye. “Dog. Get out of my sight, before I take the rest of my anger out on you.” He clenches his fists. “You have 48 hours to find me a reason not to send you to the wall like the rest of the mutts.”

I’m stuck in that moment for longer than I want to admit. His wicked eyes thirsty for my wolf body. Primed to make it suffer. He’s guardless, weaponless, so flustered I could cut off a finger before he notices my rage. I’ve spent all these years in the undercity, hating myself, and then working for the enemy, hating myself even more. All to get here, in his office, alone, with his neck exposed and my claws recently sharpened.

He’s still clenched and staring at me. I could spill his guts on his new rug. Make it slow and stretch out the pain. Revenge, payback, karma, whatever you want to call it. And maybe I’d threaten to keep his organs if he didn’t confess. But slaughtering Roth won’t bring back Ren, and it won’t save Beth.

I run, faster than I ever have. Using all the strength of my wolf torso to drive my human legs forward. Beth, please...be alive. I fly up the stairs. Stop, heart slams into my ribs. Unlock the door. The room is in complete disarray. And there she is, on the ground, curled up like the branches of a dying tree.

"Oh Chrysos, what has he done?" I hover my hands over her, afraid to get closer. Her body looks dented, her lip cut, bruises on her eyes, arms, around her neck, splotches of blood all over, a broken blood vessel in her eye, and her stomach is swollen.

"Don't. Touch. Me."

"We need to get you help, quick."

I wrap her around me and lift her. Her ankles are swollen, probably stood on by his steel cap boots. I drag her out the door and as we leave, she suddenly heaves. She vomits a green, thick bile. Her face drains entirely of colour.

"Beth? Where do I go, who can help you?"

Her eyes roll into the back of her head and her body goes limp. I lie her down in the hallway and take the risk.

"Mansyl, in confidence, I need a G.R.A.Z.I.A. doctor. Can you connect me?"

"Of course, Ellbray! Anything for the President's right-hand wolf. Though I will expect the favour back in due course. Transferring you through."

Mansyl hangs up and my earpiece rings promptly. "Dr Henley," he speaks as I answer.

"I need help," I say. "I'm a member of G.R.A.Z.I.A. and severely wounded. But it must be confidential."

"Hmm. Are you near the Floating City?"

"I'm close."

"I will send you the coordinates."

I look at the map directions and put Beth on my back. She's still unconscious.

"Beth, wake up!"

I pinch her skin, but no response. The Floating city's heavy static sluices through my ears. My eyes see five steps ahead of my body. I forget to breathe. The Boonshield is reducing the sun, laying down tiles of shadow and easing the warm breeze into tepid air. Beth won't be cold against my dense fur.

"You have to." Her consciousness comes in streams. "Save the baby first." Her arm slips off my shoulder. She's crooked and arched to one side. I set her down against a platinum wall, hoping the cold would wipe the smog from her eyes, but they're as clouded as ever.

"You're not just a womb." My nails edge out of their cocoon, pricking her skin. "Your life matters." I can't decide if I'm telling her or myself.

I hoist her back around my body, her head nudged up against my cheek. I smell the copper stuck in her teeth.

"I know he was your baby," she mumbles. "You can't let it happen to mine."

"Having children with powerful men." I tighten my grip on Beth. "It's not what you expect."

Her body slumps against mine, losing rigidity. "But I wouldn't take it back. And I don't think you would, either," she mutters.

Our bodies are battered, stretched, starved. Our minds torn, divided, chopped into fine blocks of our mother's advice, and her mother's advice, and the advice of the experts, and the doctors, and the public. Yet, we do it, over and over again.



"The baby might live, even if I don't," Beth slurs.

"What're you talking about?"

"Take care of her. You have to—"

Her mind gives out before she can tell me the rest. Finally, I find the destination and an old man in a coat greets me. A tag on his chest pocket is labelled 'Dr Henley'.

"Oh Christ. I can't treat her, Roth will kill me."

I lie Beth on the gurney. "You will treat her, or I'll kill you."

The man scuffles about the room gathering various medicines. He injects her four or five times, then he puts tubing in her stomach. It drains her blood. He staples her lip together and asks me to hold her down.

"She's on painkillers but her body might flinch, keep her still."

He pulls down the android arm hanging from the room and inputs details into the keyboard flap. It moves to her ribcage and cracks them back into place one by one.

"The nanomachines should do the rest. Let her sleep, her heart rate looks good."

"And the baby?"

He shakes his head. "Beth will live."

"We have to leave the Capital. Is she stable enough to move?"

Dr Henley coughs and grumbles. He pulls a bottle of capsules from a nearby locked cupboard and hands them to me. "If she passes out again, give her this."

I nod and gently pick her up again. Faster than I've ever run, I make it to the teleporter. I feel Beth move and groan.

“Beth?”

“Am I...”

“You’re okay, the nanomachines are doing their work. We’re at the teleporter, we have to leave the Capital.”

“I can’t teleport, he gave me one of those capsules...” She passes out.

I give her some of Henley’s medicine and her eyes open again.

“Please, Ellbray, let me call my sister,” she says.

“He’s probably monitoring my calls; it could be dangerous.”

“If we escape, it’s because he let us, Ell.”

She’s right. We won’t get far if Roth sends G.R.A.Z.I.A. guards for us. He wants us to escape and he doesn’t plan on seeing us again. That means I’ve truly missed my chance to—No. don’t think that way, Beth’s alive because you changed your mind. “Okay.” I hot-wire one of the floating cars near the teleporter. “Where to?”

“The underground lab. Here, I’ll input the coordinates.” Beth enters the information and the car drives away from the city. I start a call and put it on loudspeaker.

“Ribbon, I’m coming home now,” she yells into the speaker.

“Oh? What’s he done this time? Was the baby a fake and he found out?” says Ribbon.

“The baby’s gone.”

“And you’re still alive? Where are you?”

“On the road to you. Please, draw the blinds, I don’t want to see the dirt after being stuck in that room so long,” Beth begs.

“Right.”

“Good, see you soon.”

The phone hangs up. The air in the car feels dense, heavy. Beth hasn’t acknowledged my presence in a while.

“That sounds like code. Don’t you trust me?” I glance in her direction.

“I’m not quite sure which side you’re on.”

“You know I’m not on his.”

“But you’re not quite on mine either. A war has broken out in your homeland, I know it’s where you’d rather be.”

I keep silent.

“Not only is the weapon freed, but now Ribbon is destroying her DNA. Roth won’t be able to salvage Subject Nineteen.”

My eyes widen. “This will be the end of you.”

“No. He can’t kill me.”

“He nearly did! If it weren’t for—”

“For you? Just because you saved me, doesn’t mean I have to listen to you. You know nothing about Roth. If he wanted us dead, we’d be dead by now.”

“What was the baby, really, Beth?” I ask.

“You want to discuss mine? What about yours, huh? You slipped up too many times. And around G.R.A.Z.I.A. Whatever you do, wherever you go from here, you better learn to keep your snout shut about your son.”

We arrive at a strip of empty desert. A man approaches with a woman who looks identical to Beth.

“Whoa, brought an illegal mutt with you? What next?” she says.

Beth faces me. “It’s dangerous for you to be here, Ell. You should run. Run as far away as you can. Standing at my side is no longer a safe place for a Kwewu.” She pauses, looking towards the elevator that leads to her lab. “And never come for me again.”

I stare into her shadowed eyes. They look pained, shaky. But the line of worry on her forehead makes her request feel genuine. Whatever path she’s taking from here, she doesn’t want me to travel down it with her. And that’s all the thanks I need. “I still have to know what happened to him. Even if that means going back to the Capital. This might be the last I see of you.”

“Don’t get killed by G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldiers. You’re better than that,” she says.

“Don’t get killed by Roth. You’re better than that.”

We share a long smile.

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LILLY

**Chapter 28: Afraid of a few Dogs?**

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Khalid keeps jumping out his window and coming back with black and blue splotches on his face and knuckles. He won't tell me what he's been up to and gets angry every time I ask. Verne stays outside my door whenever he can. He doesn't want me getting back outside to see the wolfs again. I miss them. I can hear them howl sadly late at night, even when the moon is hiding.

I give Dolly's hair a brush and get Mr Frog's beard looking good. I had to apologise for throwing him at Khalid. He stroked his beard and wisely said, "It's okay, your brother's a meanie!" He and Dolly sometimes get along, but today they don't. They speak in another language, so I have to talk out loud and translate their conversation.

"Why are you always calling me names?" says Mr Frog.

"Because you're a weirdo. Your skin is too green, your tongue is too long, and you croak whenever a fly buzzes past," says Dolly.

"You are strange to me too! Your skin is too pale, you don't eat bugs, and your head is so tiny I could pop it with my nail." Mr Frog strokes his beard.

"There are plenty of people like me." Dolly flips her shiny, yellow hair.

"Hmm, ribbit! Well, what do we both like?" says Mr Frog.

"Oh! I know. We both like swimming in the water," says Dolly. She rummages through her chest and finds her 'neon gold limited edition fun-in-the-sun bikini' and puts it on.

"Yes, I do like getting my feet wet," says Mr Frog.

I make Mr Frog jump up and down. Dolly too. Dolly gives him a hug with her plastic arms. Mr Frog can't hug back because his toes are all stuck together. I hear three knocks on my door in a fun rhythm.

"You can come in, Verne," I say.

He shuts the door behind him and sits cross-legged with me. He has to hunch over to sit at my level.

"How are Mr Frog and Dolly?" His eyes are crinkly and surrounded by black, like a bruise.

"Better than ever! They've finally become friends."

"That's quite a feat. You must have mediated well."

"They figured it out all on their own."

Verne pulls a very small gift box from his pocket. It's wrapped with a pink bow. He holds it out to me and smiles so hard it makes his eyes and cheeks wrinkle. I snatch it from him and jump onto my bed.

"A present for me?"

"Open it," he says.

I rip through the bow and pop off the lid. Inside, lying on a pile of straw, is a badge. It looks like a pretty swirly shell.

Verne points to it and touches the surface. "Feel it."

I put my hands on it. It's bumpy and chalky.

"It's one of the shells from Red Island," he says. "They call it a white baby ear. I picked it up when we were there and had it sealed inside the badge. Something to remind you of me and the beach whenever you're sad."

“That’s a weird name.” I gently place the badge on my side table, barrel off the bed, and jump onto him. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze tight. “I love it,” I say. He hugs me back. “But why would I ever be sad?”

He backs away and grabs my hands. “We have to leave here soon, Lilly. The Kwewu outside are going to break into the mansion and they might try to hurt us.” Verne’s eyes look watery. “I don’t know where, but we have to leave.”

“Dad and Khalid too?”

Verne hugs me again. “Yes.”

Marching footsteps make Verne’s face scrunch up. He pries my hands away and launches out my door. I sneak behind him, following him down the corridor to Dad’s office. Peeking my head in, Dad’s cheeks are bright pink, and his desk looks wet and sticky. His bottle of alcohol is nearly empty.

A guard puts her big gun on the floor. “The gate has collapsed.” She rips off her silver G.R.A.Z.I.A. tag. “The President hasn’t sent reinforcements.” Dad stares at the wall and doesn’t answer her. She pulls a radio chip out of her ear. “Goodbye, George.” She hangs around for a little while and leaves us alone.

“Verne,” says Dad. “VERNE!”

I don’t know why he’s shouting. Verne is standing right there.

“Sir?” Verne wraps his arms around his back.

“Status update?” Dad hiccups.

Verne stares at me for a long time. He comes over and picks me up, holding me at his side. “Lilly shouldn’t hear this.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” says Dad. “Fenrir’s already told her everything.”

Verne rocks me like Dad used to when I was a kid. “They’re overwhelming the guards at the gates. The mansion door is next.”

Khalid comes in. “Afraid of a few dogs?”

I look at Verne. His bushy eyebrows look sharp and he scrunches his nose. I nudge Verne so he puts me down. I stare at Khalid with mean eyes.

“For once, you did something I can be proud of.” Khalid smiles and kneels to my height. “Your Dad murdered a whole bunch of those dogs in cold blood.” Khalid smiles.

“I don’t believe you,” I yell.

“I did what I had to do,” says Dad.

Did my Dad really hurt the wolfs?

“I told Fenrir not to go to East Cape, but he didn’t listen to me.” Dad taps his earpiece. “Roth, we need reinforcements! Send the drones, sentries, experienced soldiers. The Kwewu are breaking into my mansion; you must help me!” Dad gets up from his desk and smashes a glass against the wall. “The Commander of the army declared vengeance, my son and daughter are trapped in here. Please!”

“Your precious Roth isn’t coming to your rescue?” says Khalid.

Dad stares at his shoes.

“Dad, will we be okay?”

He doesn’t answer me.



"You've had all the gifts and experiences money could buy." Dad comes over to me. "But those things don't matter. What matters most are your memories. You can't ever forget those." He's sweaty and shaking. Tucks my hair behind my ears and pinches my cheeks.

"You mean they're more important than Shelly and even Dolly?" I say.

"Much more. Like, you can't ever forget that time your mother stepped in quicksand and was more worried about your grazed knee than drowning."

"That was scary. My knee wouldn't stop bleeding."

"It was scary. You were only out of my sight for a few seconds. Your mother wanted to strangle me for letting it happen." Dad looks at Verne and then back to me. "You have to keep remembering, okay? That way you'll never forget."

"But if I forget, Dad, you'll just remind me."

"Lilly..." He pauses. "I've always wanted you close to me to protect you. But sometimes there are other ways of protecting the ones we love. And that doesn't always mean we can be near each other, at least for a while."

"Is this because of the wolfs?"

"In part, yes. It's too dangerous being near me. I'm going to send you and Khalid somewhere safer, okay?"

"Will there be wolfs where we're going?"

"Oh honey, don't worry, there'll be so many beautiful things where I'm sending you."

"Can you tell me where?"

"It's a surprise." Dad looks at me for a really long time. "It doesn't matter how you came to be, you're my daughter, no matter what." He holds my hands strong; it almost hurts. "And I'm proud to say that."

Verne makes a noise like he's clearing his throat.

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, sweetheart." Dad looks at me with old man eyes. He thinks I don't know when he pretends, but I do. It's like when he promises there's no surprise party or promises the shiny-wrapped gift isn't exactly what I asked for. He looks at me with those same eyes and says, "I'll see you both soon."

"How soon?"

"By the time Vivé sees three moons, promise." Dad said the same thing when Mamma went to space.

"Hmph, all this sentimentality makes me sick," says Khalid. "I'm sure your little protégé will be just fine without you."

"I bet Khalid won't even go," I say.

"Verne will make sure he does." Dad gets up and frowns.

"Like hell—"

Dad cuts Khalid off. "Unless you want to be locked out of the manse and befriend the wolves."

"Verne's coming too?" I say.

"Yes, dear."

"Yay!" I clap my hands fast. "Verne's better than all the other G.R.A.Z.I.A. guards."

Dad wipes something out of his eye. "Much better." He puts an arm on Verne's shoulder and smiles. "There isn't another soldier I'd wish to have at my side right now. I trust you to protect my children." He pulls Verne in and hugs him. Dad doesn't hug Verne very often.

Khalid folds his arms. "I don't need protection from this twerp."

Dad scans Khalid from head to toe. "Based on all your bruises and cuts, I'd say protection is exactly what you need."

Khalid crunches his lip with his front teeth and storms out of the room with a huff.

"I promise to do everything in my power to protect them." Verne winks at me. "Even the bratty one."

"Are you sure you'll be okay without me and Verne?" I say.

"I'm not sure, Lilly." He pauses. "You both give me such good advice."

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BETH

Chapter 29: Childish Demands

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Mitch and Ribbon lead me to the underground lab through the resource elevator. The lab is buried about a thousand kilometres deep in the middle of the desert near the Junkyard. The perfect place to dump biological waste. A place no one goes, too hot and arid for anything to survive in, too far from any Boonshield to travel to, no teleporters in sight. The elevator ride is long and gives Ribbon enough time to open her mouth again.

“We going to talk about what happened or are we all pretending not to see the man-sized bruises on your neck?”

Mitch shuffles and removes his jacket. He places it on my shoulders. “Gets a bit cold down there,” he says.

“Right, so denial it is. What happened to the baby?” she asks.

Mitch wraps a finger around mine. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“Quit coddling her. She has a mouth and I *know* she can use it.”

“We have bigger things to discuss. Where’s Faye?”

“Oh, you mean Subject Nineteen? Right, right, I thought the best place for that alien trash was, well, in the trash compactor. I dropped her there and she’s probably been flattened with the rest of your junk.”

“Stupid.” I pause for a moment. “It’ll take much more than that to kill Faye.”

Ribbon’s eyebrows crinkle and she bites the skin off her lip. “You think anyone could survive that?”

“Faye could.” I laugh. “You know so little.”

“Try me, I know more than you think. Like how you got pregnant. It’s a hilarious story actually, Mitch would probably love to hear.”

“I know some things about you he’d probably love to hear, too.”

“Hey,” Mitch interjects awkwardly. “Can we stop fighting? Look at you Beth, you’re hurt, let’s get you inside.”

The elevator sighs to a halt and the door screeches open. We exit together but I walk ahead and find my way into my lab. I ease my coat on over my sore muscles. It feels like home. Mitch follows me in.

“Do you feel okay?” he asks.

“I feel fine.” I check my computer systems. “Looks like everything here is running well.”

The communication line bursts on, the volume turned up too loud, and Roth’s face appears in bold on my wall. My spine trembles.

“You better be pregnant with another child in one week,” he says, rapid-fire. “I’m sure you’ll find a way. We’ll explain away the timeframe somehow. Mansyl and Saed can take care of that. In any case, I’ll be there in a week, and if you’re not having my child again, I’ll bring the purple and blue capsule.” He cuts the communication before I can respond.

I collapse, and Mitch leaps to my side. “What’s he talking about?”

I sit in silence for a bit.

“The purple and blue capsule.” The torture method used exclusively by madmen. “It stimulates the pain centre of your brain, mimicking Naegleria, a parasite that consumes brain cells. It’s nothing like normal pain, it can’t be subdued by morphine, no drug can stop it.” Your brain tells you every part of your body is on fire, that your skin is being peeled off layer by layer, that your

bones are being sawed open and the marrow sucked out. I stare off into the distance. "I can't possibly describe the pain, there's nothing worse in this world."

Mitch is sweating. "I'm sorry, I just..." He trails off. "Did you want to get some rest? We can come back to all this tomorrow after you've slept."

"You might be right. At least that way Ribbon can't pester me." I laugh, but it sounds hollow.

I go to sleep that night, shivering and shaking but without fever. Flashes come – flashes of what Roth did to me. Of the dead eyes he had. The rage boiling in every limb. But as the fear wells in my stomach and rises to my chest, something halts it. I see nothing but darkness. I hear the voice again.

*You know.*

*We could.*

*Get revenge.*

"You're still there." I feel a warmth inside me. "I'm so happy you're still there."

*Not just on him though. On all of them. All the humans. Can't you see the destruction we can make together?*

"You'd do that for me?"

*We can do it together.*

I wake the next day expecting to be in a pool of sweat, but my bed is dry, and I feel well rested for once. I slip on my lab coat and button it up. It's loose, comfortable, familiar.

I track down Ribbon, who's wearing an attention-seeking, skimpy black dress. She fills my lab with her overpowering musk perfume. Mitch's leftover caffeine capsules mark where he sat moments ago.

"Can we still contact Alice?" I say.

"Why are you asking me?"

"Did you set her free too or did you kill her?"

"No, I left her with that robot awhile ago. Call her yourself, I'm done being your errand girl. I've got much better things to do." She winks.

Roth's face appears again on my communication bar. He doesn't say hello.

"Your storage units are looking light. Why might that be?"

"She's out getting exercise."

"You mean to say my weapon is out, running free? Exposed for my enemies to snatch?"

"It's all part of a plan."

"You've been the queen of failure lately."

"Trust me," I say with zero enthusiasm.

"I've sent The Organisation to bring her in. Low chance you'll ever see your precious experiment again. And once that's taken care of and I have a free moment, I'll make sure you won't see anything else again."

The phone disconnects.

Getting a bunch of ragtag mercenaries like The Organisation involved reeks of desperation. I'm sure Alice can take them out.

"He can't leave me alone for a minute," I say.

"You can't blame men any more than you can blame a dog for shitting on the carpet. It's what they do," Ribbon says.

"If you teach a dog not to, it won't. Men, not so much." I lower my voice. "Keep it down, Mitch is probably nearby."

"Wouldn't want him to know the real you, after all." Ribbon jumps off the desk. "You know, in some deep, dark, fucked up cavern of my heart, I did miss you." Ribbon laughs. "I guess there's something about sharing a womb that makes it hard to stay apart."

"Do you think that way when you're sleeping with Mitch?"

Ribbon crosses her arms. "How very *Beth* to assume I'm obsessing over you when I'm cumming on your desk."

"Mother would be so proud."

"You think you're better because you got pregnant? Oh wait, no, you got pregnant and then killed your baby. Is the whole Kwewu radiation thing real? Or is that another fantasy of yours?"

"Would you keep your mouth shut if you knew? I've achieved something you can only dream of. Do you doodle a little family in your PC? You, Mitch, and some child of yours?"

"Unlike you, I have bigger dreams."

"You can keep Mitch on whatever leash you like but listen to me carefully. When I need him, you let him off. Understand?"

"You mean, when you need to *use* him?" Ribbon laughs. "If only he could hear you, maybe it'd break the spell."

Nothing will stop me. Not you, or Mitch, or Roth, or any of his subordinates. You're all replaceable. If Mitch can't do it, someone else can. "If only my face was enough to make him love you," I answer and leave the room with a smirk.

I make my way through corridors of reinforced glass that promises to protect me against plasma and laser weapons. This place is built like a maze. A wrong left turn and you'll find yourself at a dead-end with a mis-engineered hybrid scratching its nails into the steel floor. The walls echo with the ghosts of long-gone scientists. G.R.A.Z.I.A.'s finest minds condensed into millions of terabytes of



data when Roth 'sanctioned' them for misconduct. The truth makes my stomach feel like gears, grinding my bile into microscopic particles, splitting the sac, and letting it leak into my body. If only because I might be next. The day the lab died; Roth came in toting his navy blue leather suit. A suit I remember he used only for specific purposes. Lab assistants, scientific researchers, senior technical analysts, engineers, the director herself, all handcuffed and shoved out of their labs by thick-armoured G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldiers. Before I could swallow my saliva, Roth confronted me. "The plan. It starts now." And I knew that Ribbon, Mitch and I would be the last three left when the crushing sound of footsteps stopped. I knew I'd be pregnant with his child, that the Kwewu would be blamed, and that he'd tell a tale of the corrupt scientists his sweet father was oblivious to.

I find the cell I'm looking for and hit the release button. The lock clicks open and the bars suction into the holes in the floor. There it is; a bag of bones rattling in a sack of flesh. The experiment presses its spine against the cold wall behind it. I walk forward slowly; it averts its eyes.

"Do you remember what you said to me, before you became a monster?"

It puts its knobby hands in front of itself and curls into the wall, crumpling like waste in a compactor.

"I-I don't know. Please." It begs with two arms clutched against its chest.

I curl my hands behind me and pace back and forth in front of it. "You told me to look at file 325.5 but no such thing existed in the system. The file numbers went from 325 straight to 326, as if 325.5 was some amendment."

I squat down at its eye level and stare into its one good eye. And when I say good eye, the flesh still looks like hot candle wax drying in clumps.

"I hacked into the file, which was no small feat. A year it took. A whole year. But you told me to look there and I love solving mysteries." I smirk and reach out to touch the thing, but it coils away.

"It read like the ramblings of a scientist gone insane. 'Cetera lives! It is alive. All of its pieces communicate to one another. They whisper to its core and tell it what happens in the East, the West, the Underground, the Sea. It breathes through volcanoes and bleeds through ore veins. And it releases the Pulse because it knows the humans are near and it doesn't want the humans to live anymore. It wants them to go and so it takes away from them and it hates us it hates us it's going to kill us all.' I thought you were a lost cause. But then I found proof of 'the Pulse' and I couldn't get it out of my head."

"No. No, no..." The experiment shakes its head, cracking its already weak neck. It gurgles.

"The ecosystem here, it makes no sense. Half desert, half ice, and then places like Red Island and the Salt Meadows brimming with life. Infertile humans and the virile dogs we engineered. Breeding. Consuming us. And don't even start me on the Galacktite."

"Uh-uhhh.... Mmmmmmmmm." The monster groans and drools.

I turn on the gel bars again, trapping the organism inside. "G.R.A.Z.I.A. erased the history of the Cretians, of the planet, they made it seem like we landed on a desolate piece of dying rock. But you knew, and I know, that's not true, is it beast? This planet was thriving before we came."

I look down the long halls stretching further than my line of vision. Four by four gel cages, all with strange demented experiments suffering inside. Visions of life, memories of existence, bodies minus sentience. "You knew too much. Didn't you, doctor?" My body shivers and recoils as I look at the other beasts inside. "Didn't you, doctors?" I yell down the hall.

"I have to thank you though. You were sacrificed to test the implantation of my baby. Without you, my child never would have existed." I tap my PC and click into the special access part of the lab computer. "No more suffering. No more evidence. No more." Tap. *Emergency cleansing system activated.*

And like that, the doctors become ash.

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ELLBRAY

Chapter 30: Road Trip

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My body itches to run to Vivé, to the statue of Chrysos, tap it for luck and dive into battle, but something keeps me back. Lees can look after herself. I know she's alive, I know she didn't die in East Cape. I refuse to believe my sister is dead. Then I'd have no family left. Oh, please sister, please tell me you're alive. I return to the Floating City, to G.R.A.Z.I.A. headquarters. If I can get a little more information, I might be able to help my people. When I return, I'm immediately summoned into Roth's office.

"I need to talk to you," Roth grumbles. "I see Beth made it back safe and sound to her lab, so I've demanded another child within a week. All is going to plan."

"What is it you need from me, Sir?"

"Let's walk and talk."

Roth leads me through an automatic door and a blinding white seeps in. Kubro stands on the other side and follows as we enter.

"Amongst all this chaos, I've forgotten something critically important." Roth wraps his arms around his back. I follow closely, clopping against the tiled floor. Slowing myself to keep pace with him.

"I've thought of a way you can earn your place here. Prove to me you're not Beth's lap dog. The Kwewu protesting in Vivé, they need to be silenced. I figured it best to send one of their own down. Brutalise some sense into them. Escort them back to their place behind the wall. Murder one of them and put the corpse on display. Can you do that?"

I nod. My snowed wolf torso is an easy place to hide expression. Bare skin is a human's greatest weakness.

Roth rubs his golden stitched handkerchief against his nose. The end of the entirely white, marbled hall leads to a starkly contrasted black elevator. It has only one button. Up. Roth punches it with his thick index finger. Flab bursting around the glimmering ring that adorns it. Sweeping noises, and then a ding.

"You first." Roth gestures inside.

I hide in the far corner of the elevator and hold my paws together in front of myself. Roth follows me, dwarfed by my stature.

"If you knew these beggars, would that be a problem?" Roth does not face me. He pulls at his cufflinks, undoing the sleeve. Sweat pools in the wrinkles on his hands.

I shake my snout.

"Excellent!" Roth chimes. "One of them is your sister."

Lees is alive. My eyes burn sharp and deep. I stare at his weak, exposed throat. The elevator dings and the doors open. We leave the dark and enter back into another white hall.

"Take your searing laser. That should do the trick," says Roth.

I stare at him and back to Kubro.

"Kubro will accompany you. I want to be sure whose side you're on."

This is my chance. I'll never get Roth alone again, but his idiot peon might talk, or I'll make him. I walk fast and sternly into the reception area, heading for the front door.

"Ellbray."

I stop but do not turn to Roth.

“Which will it be? Will you kill your sister, or torture her?”

I can feel the dark smirk forming on Roth’s hideous face.

“Whichever you prefer,” I answer.

Roth claps once. He steps forward and wipes his sweaty brow. “I’ll leave it up to you.” He grabs my shoulder and clinches it tightly between his stubby fingers. “Make sure you send some visual evidence. Upload an area scan to me as soon as you’re done.” He smirks. “Oh, and be careful. Vivé is in the middle of a petty little war, but I’ll be sending something to end it soon.”

I nod. My floury fur about to be dashed with blood. I leave the building. Kubro follows close behind.

“Which is it? Or are you going to turn on me?” Kubro asks.

I flip him a glare and continue walking swiftly.

“The silent type. Not my usual but I’ve always wanted to try a Kwewu. Maybe we could roleplay the whole slave thing.”

I pull out my searing knife and turn it on.

“Relax, only when you want to.”

I switch my searing knife off and lift my fingers to my lips. “Quiet.”

“Do you prefer the company of someone a little shorter? Perhaps a dead President?”

I growl, flashing a canine at Kubro.

“Or maybe you’ll try his son. Though he didn’t inherit that spectacular jawline, I’ll admit.”

I shove him against the city gate and wrap my claws around his throat. Force his tiny spine up the metal. I leave his feet dangling above the sand. Clamp tight around his thick Adam’s apple.

"You'd best heed Roth's words. I'm not to be taken lightly."

I use my other claw to prick at his cheek, bursting through his skin and letting blood leak out.

"It's sad to see a boy so small he has to puff himself up whenever he sniffs a woman stronger than himself."

Kubro's face pales. His legs crash and flail. Webs of blue veins line his forehead. His large hands try to peel my claws away from his throat. I let go.

"Fucking hell." Kubro grabs his neck and throws his head toward the ground. His face pinkens.

"Hurry up," I say.

We walk the desert path to the main teleporter where two G.R.A.Z.I.A. guards are stationed. They nod and let us enter the coordinates for our entry point. I punch in the digits numerous times, but the system does not accept my input.

"Move." Kubro shoves me to one side and slams in the rest of the digits with two big thumbs. It doesn't work for him either.

"What's wrong with this thing?" he yells at the guard.

"It's broken, genius. Let's walk," I say.

"Call Roth, have a floating car brought to us now," Kubro barks at the guard.

"Scared of a short walk?" I smirk. "It's only a little heat."

"It's forty degrees!"

"And I'm covered in fur. You'll live. Don't disturb the President." I walk away.

Kubro tries to keep pace with me. His eyebrows are downturned, his body so dry he can't sweat anymore.

"This is going to be a long trip if you refuse to talk to me."

Even with a throat devoid of saliva, the man still loves hearing his own voice.

"Come on, the trip will go faster! Tell me a story. I'm sure a half-wolf half-human has plenty of juicy experiences I can focus on while I die of dehydration. I might be able to see your tales in a mirage soon."

I interrupt his rambling. "What do you fight for?"

"No. I don't want some little bonding story where you find out that deep down, I'm two-dimensional with a morally grey outlook. Tell me what it's like to eat with those giant canines. Are your taste buds human? Is it actually 50/50?"

"Back to silence it is, then."

"Fine. You want the absolute ugly truth? I fight for the fight."

"Thought as much."

"Then why did you ask?" Kubro struggles to talk with his now swollen tongue.

"You haven't had a good fight in some time, have you?"

"Well, I can't say there are many as strong as me."

We finally reach the gates of Vivé, Kubro dragging himself behind me. Deflated. Small.

"So, what's your sister like? As cute as you? Why don't you introduce us before you kill her?"

He leans on his knees, inhaling air as we enter the temperate Boonshield and he cools off.

"My sister, Lees, is second in command of the Vivé army. Well, I suppose first in command now."

"Strong like you too."



“Hmph.” I circle around Kubro. “You could say that. Though, she is deaf.”

“Pfft, what good is a dog without its ears?”

I circle around Kubro and whisper into his ear. “She won’t hear you beg for your life when she takes it.”

Kubro perks up as the tail end of my crystal dagger slams against his head. I let his huge body slam into the ground as his consciousness slips away.

I drag him to one of the cells the army uses on rare occasions. This time it’s empty. Lees has made sure of that. I’m glad she got my message at the teleporter. Wouldn’t want some ignorant guards to catch me here.

I lift Kubro into the cell and lock it. Tight. I rest against the wall and my heart pounds. Every time I get a free moment of space in my mind, I see the Kwewu children again. I see them crumble to pieces. Children. One that reminded me of Lees when she was young. He tried to stay stoic as the other died. I hear their screams late in the night inside my head, waking in a pool of sweat. I had many chances to kill Roth, and if I had taken them, he’d never have made it this far. How am I supposed to live with their wails of pain knowing I did nothing? Maybe there is no way to redeem myself after this.

Kubro staggers around in his cell.

“I’m still alive?” he says.

“I thought you wanted to play slave?”

“There’s still time.”

I grab him by his neck and pull him into the metal bars of the cell.

"You're only alive because you're the last person protecting Roth and you know more than you let on. If you tell me what I want, I'll let you live."

"Actually, you're only alive because that desert wore me out before I could even start the fight. Give me an IV and a sleeping pill and let's try again in the morning."

I tug harder.

"Roth will track us down when you don't return with your sister's head. It won't be long until you wear out his patience."

"Beth gave me untraceable nanomachines. He'll never find us."

"Untraceable nanomachines? Nonsense. No such thing exists."

"Then how does G.R.A.Z.I.A. expect to win any wars if all his soldiers are so easily tracked?"

"They can't be tracked by others, but G.R.A.Z.I.A. can always find its own soldiers."

"No matter. This won't take long. Did Roth kill Trudo and Ren?"

"You do care for Daddy Roth."

I grip his neck tighter.

He squeaks, "I don't know. Take my word."

"What's your word worth?"

"I *never* lie."

"Give me something for your life then."

"What happens when you kill me? The President hunts you down, kills you and this entire town of dogs and burns it to the ground."

"Roth couldn't care less about you. He won't end the war to save you."

“War and chaos are where I thrive. There’s only one thing that beats the seduction of chaos, and I don’t think I’ll be getting that anytime soon.”

“Then it sounds like I should kill you either way. Or perhaps maim you instead, so your first favourite thing in the world no longer works.”

“Well, I’m sure we can come to a better arrangement. I’m not all that fond of the President.”

“Spit it out.”

“Might you be willing to let go of my throat?”

I let him go. He rubs his neck and moves to the back of the cell where I can’t reach him.

“Speaking of chaos, Roth’s infamous ultimate biological weapon has escaped.”

“Does he know where it is?”

“Not a clue. Couldn’t insert trackers into it. Rumour has it a G.R.A.Z.I.A. employee let it free and it’s wandering the scrapyards. Just looking for a friendly mentor to call home.” Kubro winks. “A strong-willed, capable, stoic woman to guide it into using its murderous powers wisely. Maybe someone with a conveniently sordid past and dark ties to her captors.”

“What do you know about the weapon?”

“Not a lot, highly secret stuff that is. But my understanding is that it appears human.”

“How will I know I’ve found it then?”

“Check the news. Roth will release a photograph and name soon; he plans to make the public fear it’s an escaped prisoner.”

“Course he does.”

“Rumour has it that Vice-President George was going to get Red Island to sell the weapon to that bitch in the East, what’s her name?”

“Lord Kabel?”

“Yes, her. They were going to trade the weapon for the Kwewus’ freedom.”

“If I get the weapon, I can make the trade myself.”

“What about Beth? You two seemed awful close after that *minor* incident with the Kwewu.  
Are you going to try and save her too?”

My claws want to rip open his cell and then his lungs. Snap every rib and use the splinters to crack open the rest of his organs until he bleeds to death. Then maybe he’ll come close to the pain those Kwewu felt. But I compose myself. He thrives off hatred.

“No one can save Beth from herself.”

---

**BETH**

**Chapter 31: Diabolical**

---

When I open my eyes, Mitch is there, sitting in his floating chair, probably watching animal documentaries on his PC. A curl of stray black hair falls over his brown eyes. He turns his PC off and hurries over to me, holding me close, ignoring my wet skin, and plants a kiss on my shoulder.

“Do you ever take that lab coat off?”

“I don’t get out much,” I smile.

“Ribbon’s talking about going to Red Island. Says it’s safe there. She wants me to go with her.”

“And will you?” I pause and walk within an inch of him. “Do you want to go with her?”

“I—” He stops and his lip shakes. He looks into my eyes for a long time.

I run my hands along his waist and pull him into a gentle embrace. “You’ve been here for me whenever I need you.” I rub my hand along his back. “I have to go back to the Floating City.”

Mitch pulls back. His eyes blacken. “Back to him?”

“I’ll always be yours but—”

“Please don’t go,” Mitch begs. “He’ll hurt you again.”

“Bravo,” comes the voice of my sister.

Mitch and I part.

“Can I talk to the bitch alone, handsome?”

“I guess,” he says, leaving the room.

"You are one hell of an actor, sis, I almost admire it. The commitment to this façade of niceness. He won't come with me, will he?"

"Why're you going to Red Island anyway?"

"I'm kind of bored playing house in *your* life and I want to go make my own. Red Island is full of hunks, drinks and G.R.A.Z.I.A. can't touch it." Ribbon presses her hand against my collar bones, close to my throat. "But, if I hear you've hurt my Mitch, I will come right back here and hurt you." She lets go.

Try me. "It's okay to wish you had my life. Mother always knew I was the better twin. And what I plan to do will have you spitting out your drink all the way over in Red Island."

"What evil have you planned now?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"You're going to kill the President, aren't you? If he dies, so will you."

"I've killed before, what's another Roth to add to my collection?"

"What? You killed Ren and Trudo?"

I look at my nails and walk forward until my lips nearly touch her ear. "They had too much control over Roth," I whisper. "But I framed Henley and he still thinks to this day he did it."

"Don't expect to see me. Ever again."

"Then stay out of my way. No playing the Beth card. I'd best not hear about you again."

"Mitch, dear, would you come here?" Ribbon yells.

Doesn't matter, he won't believe her anyway.

Mitch runs to us obediently.

Ribbon puts her body right up against his. "I know you love her. You could have me, but you love the little psychopath. I thought she left me this lab as a gift but it's a dank, dirty, underground hellhole filled with illegal and immoral experiments that she wanted me to run while she was fucking the President and flouting her bloated belly. The only thing she cares about is herself. Good luck Mitchy, you won't last long with her." Ribbon kisses him on the cheek and leaves.

Mitch gives me a knowing look. An almost-sigh at this classic Ribbon behaviour. He's all mine now.

"Roth will kill me. I can't give him what he wants. But I'll tell him I can. I'm going to the Capital, his new 'baby' implanted, and when he's close enough to hear my empty womb, he dies."

Mitch saunters to me, plants a kiss on my head, and runs his hands through my hair.

"I need your help, Mitch. To take him down," I say, leaning into his chest.

"You know how I feel about you. I'd do anything—"

"If we enact my plan, we may kill thousands of G.R.A.Z.I.A. employees. Civilians. Does that mean anything to you?"

"How many would he kill if we didn't? How many Kwewu would die before he did?" He pauses and swallows, bringing me in closer. "How long would you have to live?"

"They might hail us as heroes one day, when it's all over. But you must know, if you agree to this plan, we'll never see each other again."

"We might die?" He kisses me once more. "There's something beyond life, I know it. We'll meet there. When he's finally gone."

There's absolutely nothing beyond this existence and you'll be forgotten quicker than Roth. "Then follow me to Subject Nineteen's facility."

---

FAYE

**Chapter 32: A Gilded Coin**

---

The light shades swirl back and forth in sync with my churning gut. The lamp next to the couch is rubble on the floor. Desk drawers slowly edge open. A plume of dusty cobwebs float behind the couch. The air thickens. A pressure like the trash compactor. The windows rattle at every side of the house. The door whines. Close to caving in. The whistles outside are sentient, aggressive, rumbling against the walls, fighting for a way in. I crick my aching neck towards Alice's back and yell through the screeching sounds of the cabin's foundation. "Alice, will this place hold up?"

She remains still and shoots her hand up in the air, hushing me. Statuesque, silent. The light shade comes to a standstill. Minutes pass. I stay frozen. I can't sense Alice like I can humans, her emotions are empty.

"This is no maelstrom. This is him."

"Who?"

"President Roth. A man who plays the wolf, admitting to the public that he'll eat them."

Alice pinches my arm with her finger and thumb and drags me through the door. "We're leaving. Keep your head down," she says. "Don't arouse suspicion."

"What about the weapons?"

"No time."

I let her drag me through the city, avoiding stray octopuses and careful humans. She takes me back to the submarine and lets me enter first. With a few clicks, we rise through the layers of ocean towards the surface. We exit near the Junkyard.

"Where are we going?"



A low ringing noise interrupts. Alice presses her earpiece. She listens without speaking for a long time and then closes the call with, "Understood."

"What's that about?"

"Beth wants me to destroy your DNA at the lab in Vivé. G.R.A.Z.I.A.'s last hope if you die."

"They're going to clone me. Probably subject another like me to years of isolation and pain."

Alice walks ahead, leaving dust from the sand behind her every heavy step. "The path is long, and we can't use teleporters or main routes. You up for sabotaging G.R.A.Z.I.A.?"

Watery acid rises from a pit in my stomach and through my throat. Bile rushes from my mouth and sinks into the sand. My arms and legs shake. The vast openness of the desert plays on my mind. Far from the safety of a confined cell. It sickens me. To miss my prison. To fear the horizon. Alice appears in front of me with an open gauntlet.

"I'm sorry everything's moving so fast." She bends down to my level, avoiding my pile of sick. "You can do this."

I reach for her hand and let her lead me through the desert. The lone rotten cactus is blurry. My mind and body disconnect. I let mine wander into Alice's. A tiny space with no emotions. Somewhere I can rest for a little while.

We hear the chaos before we arrive at Vivé. Yells, guns, marching, the cries of war. Or so I'm told. Vivé is loud, sprawling. Buildings stacked on top of each other, all finished with silver detailing or etching. Some buildings made entirely of silver. The Boonshield envelops us in tepid, comfortable air. I take a breath deep and hold the freshness in my gut. Surrounded by tall, spiked fences, what I imagine an ominous leader would be protected by. Within the gates, I see Kwewu for the first time. Torsos of fur speckled different colours, with the legs of humans. Their snouts like long, long noses,

padded at the end, high pricked ears with tiny whiskers poking out. The backdrop, a tall mansion with countless stairs leading to huge double-doors. I assume that's where G.R.A.Z.I.A. lives.

Peeking through the gates, I spot a group of soldiers approach a large wolf statue with a fountain at the bottom. They all bear the G.R.A.Z.I.A. symbol. They hold laser rifles against the bodies of Kwewu. Children, even. The people look defeated, weary, and miserable. My body clenches.

"It's not worth it," Alice says sternly.

"Move it!" comes the snarling voice of a guard. He jams the barrel of his gun into a small boy, whose parents are nowhere to be seen. The boy flies into the dirt, scraping the pads of his hands and his knees against the cobblestone. Blood wells on his knees but he manages to pull his frail body up and mutter an almost silent "Sorry" to the guard. Something rises within me and I bend a hole in the gate. Alice's hand on my shoulder doesn't stop me. I run into the middle of the chaos. The middle of a war. The guards catch me, weapons aimed, and shout, "Get out of the way!" I halt in front of the beaten boy and look into the eyes of his assailants.

"This is a G.R.A.Z.I.A. order, step aside civilian!"

Hah, he thinks I'm human. "Leave the boy alone."

"You moron," says the guard. He loads his weapon.

The surge of adrenaline wears off. Alice leaps from the shadows, but I don't have time to race a loaded gun.

In a blur of movement and sound, the guards are dismantled. Two snapped necks and two limp bodies on the ground. Their killer comes into focus. Clean, salt coloured fur. Armour that shines. White-blue eyes.

The smooth, black pad of her claw grabs a holstered laser gun from its belt. She stares at the Chrysos statue. It's howling at the moon, water trickling from its open fangs.

"What cruelty. To be beaten down in front of your God." She scans me and puts her weapon away. "Why protect the child?"

"I—"

Alice interrupts, grabbing me by both shoulders. "We should be leaving now."

"I am Ellbray." She holds out her paw. "You have earned my respect here today."

I wrap my hand around it. Soft, but stern. Padded. Much bigger than my own. We shake hands.

"I'll get them to safety," says Ellbray.

"Thank you," I reply in a whisper, still mesmerised by her strength and striking appearance.

Alice drags me around the front of the gates and off to the side where the Vivé lab is. "You need to lay low; we don't know who works for G.R.A.Z.I.A. and who doesn't, so stop befriending the locals."

Compared to the ornamented city, the lab is nothing special. A square, uninspired building coloured a dirt-white plastered with 'G.R.A.Z.I.A. Corporation' in thick black gothic text.

A guard posted at the entry shouts to us, "who goes there?"

Alice edges forward. "We're here to inspect the lab."

"Not a chance," she laughs.

Alice lunges into the guard and punches her smack in the face, then in the sternum. I can feel the guard's bones move back within her chest. She's winded. Alice pins the guard down and presses her thumbs into her windpipe. The guard's cells slow, her oxygen drops.

We find the inside of the lab quiet and empty. We were expecting guards, lab technicians and G.R.A.Z.I.A. staff. The lack of bodies is eerily disturbing. Alice opens the cryogenic chamber, releasing a puff of white mist. The DNA is gone but Alice pulls from it a black coin with coloured spots. She holds it out to me. "Galacktite, the rarest and most expensive mineral on Cetera." She throws me the coin. "And the calling card of The Organisation." Alice cracks her knuckles. "Damn them."

"The Organisation?"

"A band of mercenaries for hire. Slaves to the highest bidder." She flips the table, smashing the dainty glass utensils on it, and bending back the chamber lid. "And Roth's always the highest bidder."

---

BETH

Chapter 33: It All Goes White

---

I take a self-driving hover car to the Floating City and direct it to the Red House. The heart of the main city, G.R.A.Z.I.A.'s headquarters. It shadows the buildings below it, crafted from long extinct precious metal. The perimeter is empty, surrounded by fences and guards. I make my way up the elevator and into Roth's den. His office is missing light. Absent the mechanical clinks of floating buildings joining with one another. New carpets and extravagant rugs replace the ones the Kwewu children died on.

"You have produced another child?" he says.

Mansyl and Saed knock four times and tow a cuffed and blindfolded Kubro in with them.

"We found him imprisoned in Vivé," says Saed.

"Yes Sir, Vivé," agrees Mansyl.

Kubro fights against his chains, muscles and veins straining. I look at his scaly skin and cracked lips; dehydration nips at him.

"Cuff him to the chair," says Roth.

*It wouldn't take much*

*for us to*

*kill this one.*

The voice speaks to me, awake or asleep, it doesn't stop anymore.

No, save your energy my child, this death is beneath you.

“Feel him.” I yank Roth away from his peons and shove his hand under my shirt. My child, let your warmth emanate through me, for only a moment, so your ‘father’ can feel you. “Dr Henley could turn the live feed back on. You could see your son again.” One last time.

“Which capsule catches out liars?” says Roth.

I grasp my stomach, digging my nails into the epidermis. You swirl around in the cavities of my body, feeding off my life force, hungry to escape from the dark void I trapped you in. Roth won’t stop your escape. He may have money, power, people, but I have something he can never have. Growth.

“Green capsules act as sedatives and tend to bring out truths,” I say. “Not necessarily the truths you ask for.”

“This traitor doesn’t deserve a sedative.”

“Traitor?” Kubro pipes up. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Or was it you?” Roth undoes his top collar button. “Mansyl?”

“Sir, I would never betray you,” says Mansyl.

“We are loyal to you, Sir,” says Saed.

Roth rolls up his sleeves and grips something on his desk. “One of you betrayed me.” He rips Kubro’s blindfold off. His feathery, golden eyebrows twitch slightly but his skin hides a layer of sweat. He refuses to show any weakness, he refuses to feed the President. Not that it matters—with Kubro’s half-wit brain, he’d paint himself guilty without even knowing it.

I burrow into my pocket and prick my finger on the device. It injects me with beta-blockers, to prevent any nervous symptoms.

“You’ve defected, haven’t you, Kubro? You’re with the Vivé army now. I knew you were unreliable!” Roth types heavy against his virtual keyboard. “No matter, Vivé’s inhabitants will be dirt once I send this strike.” He enters in the combination codes. Familiar keyboard taps. I know those codes. Sticky bombs, capable of reducing life to particles without damaging the city walls. An early version of the extinction drones. Ellbray went to Vivé. I look into Kubro’s vacant eyes. She’ll die there.

Roth flings an antique letter opener at Mansyl. The blade nearly rips through his cheek, instead lodging itself in the million-dollar painting behind him.

The twin’s bodies tense. Their jaws lock. Eyelids plaster open.

Roth smashes his fists against his desk. I hear a crackle, almost as if his bones shattered. “Beth let Subject Nineteen escape. Let *my* weapon free!” He laughs. “I’ll destroy the Underwater City. Someone saw my weapon there.” He smashes his thick fingers against the keyboard. “Drones and targeted nuclear fields...there won’t be anything left of them!”

“Enough,” Kubro barks. “This is madness.” He winks at me. “And not the kind I’m accustomed to.”

Roth’s eye twitches. He stands still and quiet for longer than I’ve ever seen before, his breaths silent and shallow. “Hah.” He drags the deconstructor over and aims it at Kubro, tinkering with the settings. “Someone told Lord Kabel about my weapon, and I *know* it wasn’t Beth, so which one of you sacks of flesh was it, hmmm? Who leaked *my* secrets to my biggest threat?”

“You haven’t felt your baby yet,” I say with a trembling voice. “Why don’t you come and feel your legacy?” These beta-blockers better kick in soon.

Kubro fights against his shackles manically, cracking capillaries as he struggles.

Roth switches the deconstructor to Mansyl. Both twins put up their hands.

"Please, Sir, it was not us that informed Lord Kabel," says Mansyl.

"M-Manny had no part in this, p-please believe us," says Saed.

Roth spins it toward me. His eyes burn holes in my body. Right through my face, chest and stomach.

"Stop this nonsense." Kubro speaks up. "What's the point in killing us all?"

"How about Red Island? Let's kill everyone there too, shall we?" Roth's bloodshot eyes dart between all of us, settling on Kubro. "Don't you agree?"

"Do what you want to the Islanders, just un-cuff me."

"You remember this one, eh Beth?" Roth pulls a purple and blue capsule from his pocket.

The capsule that tells your brain every part of your body is on fire, that your bones are being sawed open and the marrow sucked out. My eyes widen. Kubro and I share a long, knowing look.

Roth shoves it into Kubro's mouth, holding it and his nose shut. Kubro writhes and kicks, but eventually swallows.

Moments pass. Kubro stops struggling. Frozen in pain. Shadows contort the bones of his bloodless face.

"Do you know the worst pain known to man?" Roth grips Kubro's thigh and kicks him off the chair. "This capsule."

The capsule that sends the sane mad.

"Who's next?" Roth skips behind the deconstructor. "Hah, this one's a little more permanent." He flicks the switch.



Time slows, if only for a short moment. Where is the deconstructor aimed? At my baby? Or at Kubro? It is clear in the moment Mansyl becomes a pile of ash. When Saed's eyes turn wet and red.

"I wasn't sure whether one of the twins betrayed me." Roth cricks his neck to make eye contact with Saed. Saed returns it, eyes brimmed with terror.

"No. No.... no, no...." Saed is soaked with tears.

"Either Saed did it and would confess to stop me, or Mansyl did and he died for it. Two birds with one stone." Kubro's face crunches under Roth's shined leather boot. Unable to move.

"Neither of them did it, but you killed Mansyl anyway?" I spit. Mansyl may have been a waste of corporate expenditure, but he didn't deserve to die like that.

"That leaves you." Roth's face, smug and grinning. He stands over Kubro, looking down on his suffering peon. "Oops." He drops two medical sharps on Kubro. They sink into his upper arms. With the purple and blue capsule fully absorbed, he barely notices the stabbings.

Roth's shadow envelops me. I crunch my teeth against each other, shredding my jaw. Wrapping two arms around my stomach to protect my unborn child.

"About time I checked on my son," he whispers in an unsettling, low tone.

Before I can process it, he's wrapped himself around my body and pulled me into him tight. Squeezing my baby in between us like a vice. He pushes into me, harder and harder. "I'll kill everyone in the West, then the people of the Capital. Leaving you, me and my son." His hot breath whistles in my ear. "Once I get my baby out of you, you'll die too."

He releases me at the sound of a device ringing. Presses his ear to answer a call.

Numbness covers my torso.

"Mm. I understand, yes. Goodbye, then." Roth replies, pulling his hand away from his ear.

"Now I get to torture another betrayer." He kicks Kubro in the kidney. "Your little lover is here."

Finally.

Mitch is dragged in by two guards, bruised, beaten, pulsating.

"Is this clown the infamous Mitch?" He throws a gut-wrenching kick into Mitch's groin.

Mitch spits up saliva as he's held on his knees by the guard. "The idiot who loves the scientist."

"Her name is Beth." Mitch shouts with venom.

"What a fool. Kill him."

Mitch looks at me. One last doe-eyed look.

"Do it now, Mitch!" I scream.

"You've underestimated me." Mitch spits the explosive from his mouth. Nineteen's DNA, a small representation of her devastating power. It mutates into a hot molten floating ball. A gas, expanding like a star, imploding within itself. Roth understands for a brief second before it all turns white.

*Don't*

*worry*

*I won't let*

*your baby die.*

---

**FAYE**

**Chapter 34: Wanted Criminal**

---

We cut through the outskirts of Vivé to avoid G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldiers. I am mesmerised. Silver buildings reflect the sun.

“We have to go,” Alice reminds me. She beckons me down a quiet street.

I blunder into a glass building, hand outspread against the window. The shelves inside are full of neon lights labelled ‘Sale’, ‘Trade ins Available’ and ‘Get Cash Now’. Various ancient pieces of technology are on display: 8K Ultra Definition TVs, virtual reality goggles and smartphones. I catch my breath. The wonderment from all the flashing lights leaves me motionless. One disturbing TV snaps me out of my childish ignorance. The host is a prim and proper looking woman wearing a red blazer and matching red lipstick. Her hair cut into a bob, with yellowy-blond streaks throughout. In a low voice, with text scrolling rapidly across the screen, she relays a message:

“Breaking news: a dangerous convict has escaped the G.R.A.Z.I.A. prison in Tula and is said to be on the run. There is a 10,000 mue reward for her safe return; the bounty states she must be returned alive. Faye Rowston is the current alias she goes by but her actual identity is not known. She is considered armed and dangerous, so approach with caution. Please note that this image of her is slightly dated, she is three years older now and may have gained some weight. This news piece was brought to you by the G.R.A.Z.I.A. news bureau.”

My face appears on the screen. G.R.A.Z.I.A. wants me to disappear back into the underground. Into the cells where I discovered all kinds of pain. Wherever I go, they’ll hunt me down. Maybe it would be better for me, for Alice, if I just went back there...

Alice snatches me and drags me down an alleyway. Flings open a grate and signals me to climb down. I carefully navigate into an off-smelling muck.

“The old sewage lines will keep us hidden. You’re wanted now, we have to stay out of people’s way.”

She bolts the sewage entry shut.

I’m running. Moving. In a tiny space. A mouse’s den. Suffocated by dim light and stale air. No goal in mind. No control over my legs. Darting through corridors and leaping over loose rocks. Mud splatters against my ankles and searing, acidic water layers coat my legs like grime. I hear an explosion. What’s happening up there?

“It’s alright. They won’t come down here,” Alice says.

She can read my mind?

“Who put that bounty on me?”

“If I were to guess? President Roth.”

“Is he responsible for all this?”

“He’s responsible for most of the horror in this world.”

The tunnel twists and narrows but goes on and on. My legs swell and sting. Cracking lights dim. My stamina plummets and I slow down. The walls crumble around me. The floors turn to concrete. My arms wrap around prison bars. My vocal cords mute to the guards again.

*Do it.*

My grumbling stomach echoes through the hall. Humid air. Choking cold. The other prisoner wails. Holes in my back from the canings and whippings ache.

*Kill them.*

My flab wastes away. My body is back to its skeletal, knobbed form. My face warps. Features engulfed by a white face. A stain of blankness atop a withered body.

*You can eliminate every life. They live to hurt. You can stop the hurt forever.*

Or my own life, if I let them have me again, they'll leave everyone else alone.

Alice's voice shocks me out of the nightmare.

"Faye".

Faye. Faye, not Subject Nineteen. Faye. I untense my muscles. Nestle my face in her chest-plate. The cold metal cools my bright red cheeks.

"It's okay, you're okay now." Alice speaks soft through the echo of her armour. "Deep breaths."

I slow my frequent breaths and inhale deeply. Crying, I stare at my shaky hands for a quiet moment. Then collapse back into Alice, sniffing and wailing.

"This place reminds me of..." I whimper.

"It's okay, Faye, you're only human."

The word human clings to my mind like sticky web. Knotting the synapses in my skull, repeating itself aggressively. I push Alice away.

"I'm not human though, am I?" I snivel and wipe tears roughly from my cheeks.

"Does it matter?"

I stop convulsing and still my body. Of course it matters. "I guess not." I rub my arm and turn away from Alice.

"You may hate humans now, but give them a chance. They're not all the same."

"Yeah, sure, all that suffering and torment at the hands of humans. The hellish beatings, the never-ending starvation, the maddening isolation—it all comes from a place of goodness, does it?"

It's all excusable because they meant well. Or was it for a greater good? What are you, Alice?" I stare at the gold metal that hides her body. "Are you one of them too?"

Alice plonks forward. Spatters of nasty water flick up the pipe walls as her clunky boots submerge. She puts her hand out and rests it on my head. Wiggling her hand back and forth, rustling my hair into a burden of knots.

"You'll see," Alice says. Less monotone than usual.

I sniff the last bit of snot back in. My face dries. Ankle-deep in human sewage. The tunnel a lazily stacked set of concrete and brick, narrow enough that I can touch both walls with arms outstretched. My eyes feel droopy, and the dim, flickering lights don't help.

"Do you need a break?" says Alice.

"No, I'm fine."

"Tell me if you do."

You'd know though, wouldn't you? If you can read my thoughts. "Is 10,000 mue a big reward?"

"Not really."

I wish I could read Alice's feelings.

I trudge through the tunnel, following the sparse trail of aging bulbs. Keep my nostrils stubbornly shut and keep moving forward. As I pass the lights, they mould into a blur. Each bulb is caged by jutting wires. The pattern on the roof changes from gravel into spray-painted flat concrete. I stop. Alice too. Silence. I stare at the ceiling as tiny drips fall from the roof, down my face, zagging along my arm. The G.R.A.Z.I.A. logo, sprayed in glowing paint. I slam my fists against the concrete wall. "He's everywhere! The President, G.R.A.Z.I.A., they own everything. Even this sodding pile of garbage." I look down at my hands, now knobs of raw meat.

"That's not going to stop you, is it?" Alice walks past. "Come on, I know a way out."

I continue down the tunnel. Rubbing at my beaten hands. Fingering the cuts. My eyes water and shut. Back hunches. I drag my body through the wet slop. Limbs feel like they're falling away from their sockets. I feel like I'm back in the desert.

"Let's take a break." Alice doesn't ask this time.

"What if they come for us? You saw all the soldiers."

"Then I'll take care of them."

We walk toward the nearby stairs and lean on the railing. The echo of drips and squeaks breaks the silence. The concrete ground sends shivers down my spine. I close my eyes for what feels like a second, but it may as well be an eternity.

I jolt, awakened by metallic crashes. The kiss of two swords. Alice battling. A crystalline dagger, impossibly small, dancing in Alice's gloved hands. The other dancer is shrouded by a black, patchy hood and shawled in a leather coat. The only detail I can make out is their beaming jade eyes. I turn my attention to their shuffling feet. A carefully choreographed quarrel. A clomp of Alice's boot met by the scrape of the enemy, a quick slide out of harm's way. The attacker wields a thin katana blade, blinding me as it reflects light off the tunnel roof. Razor-sharp and feather-light. The two blades come together, locked begrudgingly in position. Their bodies shake and clatter in unison, both blades refusing to snap. Alice pulls away. Leaps backward. Her foot blesses me with a spray of scungy droplets. She dives forward, holding her dagger up as a shield. A piece of the enemy's hood flutters to the ground and hugs the filthy shallows. The enemy throws its katana forward, mere inches from stabbing Alice in the shoulder blade. Alice ducks and rolls to her opponent's left. On her way, she slams her shoulder into mine. I drop into the muck and don't get up. She tackles the enemy with the full force of her right shoulder, sending them tumbling into the water.

“Calm down!” Alice holds the dagger against their neck. “I’m not your enemy.” The distorted tip draws warm blood from their throat.

My mouth prunes. I’m frozen.

The hooded person’s eyes widen, and they shake their head left to right, sternly. “Negative,” her assailant states, their voice echoing back and forth down the tunnel. “Number 8224713, the barcode of the Generation of Resource Acquisition with Zero International Aggregates corporation.” The voice is flat but feminine, surprisingly soft.

Alice loosens her grip around the hooded person’s neck and stands back, letting her assailant slide down the concrete wall, collapsing into a hunched ball at her foot. She convulses, struggling to catch her breath.

Alice looks down at her hands and her body, examining her golden armour. She turns her attention back to the hooded person. I swallow. My thumping heart halts. I stand up and plod through the thick, murky water and kneel in front of the hooded person, calf-deep in sewage. Her blade within striking distance. My heart stays slow.

“Why would you think that?” I lean against my knee and lock on to her gleaming eyes.

“This armour is an outdated model from the Generation of Resource Acquisition with Zero International Aggregates corporation. Drones of the government are permitted to wear it.” She drags her body up the wall, leaning against it, still hunched over.

“You mean G.R.A.Z.I.A.?” I say.

“G.R.A.Z.I.A.” the hooded person pauses. “Updating language database.”

I snap my glare to Alice. “Why are you wearing G.R.A.Z.I.A. armour?”

“It’s stolen,” Alice assures.



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ELLBRAY

Chapter 35: Loss

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I pace back and forth and smack my claws along the cell bars, making clanging noises. As I get to the last cell, the door ajar, I hit it closed. How did Kubro escape? There must be someone in Vivé who knows him. He gave me nothing. Absolutely nothing. I sigh.

The projection screen in the jail flickers on with an emergency broadcast. The newscaster speaks.

“This emergency broadcast comes to you live from the Floating City. As you can see, the G.R.A.Z.I.A. building is in disarray, with staff behind me in chaotic panic. An extremely loud bang was heard from one of the higher floors only moments ago. Investigators believe that there was a biological explosion as no damage was done to the building as a result of the blast. It has been confirmed, to our horror, that President Roth is dead. A projection meeting of the G.R.A.Z.I.A. council members and beneficiaries will be held urgently to decide who will be the interim leader. Rest in peace Roth, the last of his family.”

The projection screen flickers off.

My muscles cramp and I fall to the ground. I smash my fists against the walls. Tears leak from my eyes and darken the concrete. I sniff them back. Now I'll never know. I hug my knees and rock back and forth. I'll never know if he killed my...The truth died with Roth. I'll have to live for something other than revenge. My father and sister wouldn't have me crying in a jail cell, yearning for the unattainable. There's more to this life than the deaths that surround it.

Vivé's buildings sparkle when I get outside. The Boonshield here is a few degrees below the Capital. Fur's a much better insulator than bare skin. I find myself drawn to the Chrysos statue again, begging it for guidance. As much time as I've spent with him, he never speaks back. He didn't speak

back when mother was murdered by G.R.A.Z.I.A. scum. He didn't speak back when father died. Or when Ren left this world. Will he answer me now when all of his children are destined to die?

"Ellbray, Ellbray!" comes a high-pitched voice. He bowls into me; tiny paws pull at my pant leg.

"Rye? Where's Kredo? It's dangerous out here."

Rye burrows his head into me. His back convulses. Looking down on a soul so much smaller than my own, fur dampening, my heart sinks into my stomach. When Ren was small, he'd push his snout into my leg and cry until his eyes were dry. Maybe over a skinned knee, or a broken toy, so I'd pick him up and brush my snout against his. I should've been there, fighting the war with Kredo. Cradling Rye won't bring back his father.

Rye sniffs back his last tear and releases me. "I wanted to show you." He pulls out a crumpled Ralak from his pocket. "Me and the other kids made this for Lees."

On the digital face of the Ralak pad, a sketch of Lees holding a battle spear over a G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldier. "That's a great drawing. Though I think her fur is coloured more like the sand than the sun."

Rye bites his lip. "You're right! She'll hate it."

"That's not what I—"

Rye sprints to the fountain, plonks himself down and deletes all the colour from the sketch. He was always a handful, like Kredo.

A drop from the sky distracts me. Rain under a Boonshield? Unless—there it is, I never smelt it or heard it, that was the intent. Floating in the skies, red dots like moulded clay, staring down at the city. Roth's last gift to us. I roll and grab Rye. He drops the Ralak. Sprinting to the manse stairs, the clatter of gunshots stops me dead. My people, being mowed down, bullet after bullet, as they

try to break through to the Vice-President. One gets kicked down the bottom of the stairs. I knew her well. Broken nose, plasma wound opening itself up more. Blood. Everywhere.

“They’re going to...” she spits up crimson foam, “exterminate us, Ellbray...”

“Not if I have anything to say.”

She coughs. One last violent, deep, lung collapsing cough. I close her eyes. “Your death won’t be for nothing.”

Rye is pale. His lips trembling. His body frigid. I sweep him up in my arms and sprint up the steps, ducking beneath the stray bullets. “You have to leave! Sticky bombs above. They seek flesh and don’t discriminate.”

The G.R.A.Z.I.A. men look towards the sky. Stopping their gunfire. Fear strikes their meagre eyes. My people couldn’t care less. They know their deaths are near. They use the gap to push through and overwhelm the men, tearing their throats open.

“Ellbray, fight with us,” they plead.

They take down the final guard at the doors.

“Shut the manse doors, windows, anything you can, protect yourselves from the bombs!”

I see the red demons scattered in the sky. “Run!” I scream to a group below. They hurtle toward me, but the sticky bombs dip to eye level. Two people get stuck. They try to pry them off, but in an instant the sticky bomb explodes and rewires their brains. I close the door as a sticky bomb flies towards me. It crashes into the building.

“You saved me,” one of them says.

“You saved yourself.”

“Why is this happening to us? What did we do?”

"You existed. This is Roth's last evil; I can feel it in my claws."

"He'll kill his own men!"

Did he send them here because of me? Are all these people going to die because Roth wanted to kill me? "Where's Commander Fenrir?"

"Nobody knows, he was last seen heading towards the war council room with the wife."

"Not like him." I bend to Rye's level. "Rye, stay here, these people will look after you." They nod in agreement. Then, I address the soldiers. "Let's take these G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldiers down."

The corridors take us through endless paths. Ostentatious rooms, artefacts, and wasted space. The manse is bigger from the inside. We're forced to take a few G.R.A.Z.I.A. lives on the way, but the numbers just don't add up. It's sparsely littered with guards and soldiers, but not enough to protect the manse.

"Look at the security camera." One of the warriors points to the screen.

"They've locked themselves in a weapon cache." I stare into the screen. G.R.A.Z.I.A. pawns, trudging through piles of weaponry, hiding behind several tightly secured doors. Either we leave, or they ambush us as we enter. We're at the disadvantage.

"There must be a way to open it."

"I'd guess the only person who can authorise that would be Vice-President George." I check the other cameras, but no sign of him. "There's no camera systems inside the bedrooms or offices. You check his bedroom, I'll check his office," I say.

The warriors split up. I recall the office location from a time when Lees, father and I visited. He presented us like gifts for George's army. George seemed kind, but only feigned interest in us. There's the office. You can tell by the embellished door. Silver, gold, and emerald patterns outline it. It's unlocked. The inside is quiet. G.R.A.Z.I.A. tags and badges are discarded on his desk.

George is huddled at the edge of the room, pressed against his window. Arms wrapped around himself. I half expected a trembling, cowering man, but that's not what I smell here.

His body doesn't react to me entering, but he speaks softly. "They were going to attack the Capital next...Roth would've killed them all anyway...but instead of him, it was I who sent them to die. All of my people. As a nobleman, for the greater good. For Vivé's prosperity. Now I'm here, as a killer, waiting for my punishment."

"Let me ask you," I wrap my paw around his tense shoulder, digging in my claws, "where is Fenrir?"

"Whatever conspiracy killed him, it wasn't one of mine." George closes his eyes. "He was here, shouting my doom only a time ago. Then he was gone."

"Do you know where Lees is?" I grip him tighter.

"Not a clue," he sniffs, looking at the bombs outside. "Roth and I grew up together. His father saved me from becoming a drunk street rat in West Cape. All because my father lent Trudo a toy once some many eons ago. The true President, a man of heart." He pulls off his own G.R.A.Z.I.A. badge and squeezes it tight. "He didn't come for me. I pleaded to be rescued and instead he sent bombs to finish the job."

One thing you have right, Trudo was a man of heart. "It isn't much consolation to the dead wolves." My knife wants out of its sheath. "Your sadness doesn't fix this."

"I know." He leaps upwards, pushing me away. Sets his tie in place, buttons his shirt, brushes his eyebrows smooth. "I'm ready. That painting there is a door to a secret tunnel. That will take you out to Three Moon Point, near the coast. You and the others can escape to safety there." He pulls off his G.R.A.Z.I.A. watch. So heavy with precious metals it dents the floor. Rips off his G.R.A.Z.I.A. breast-pocket tag. Snaps his G.R.A.Z.I.A. credit card in two. "Kill me."

Still, I smell no fear. I hear wolves rustling in the halls. Homing in on the human stench.

“Roth is dead.” I take one step forward. “Trudo forgotten.” Another step. “Who do we have left? Lord Kabel, our friendly neighbour.” I slip my knife out. The blade reflects light off his bald head.

“The bumbling councillors of Red Island?” The blade flashes orange. “Or the leader of the stinking West?”

George drops to his hands and knees, exposing the back of his neck. “Do it quick. I’ve suffered enough.”

“And you’ll suffer much more.” I slam the flat edge of the blade on his neck. Ironing his G.R.A.Z.I.A. barcode into burnt obscurity. “You’re not owned anymore.”

He grips the back of his neck and curls into a ball, writhing back and forth.

“The Vice-President is the natural heir to G.R.A.Z.I.A. Go to the Capital and take your throne.” My boot hits his back, knocking him over. “And don’t forget that the wolves got you there.”

George’s eyes widen and whirl. He takes his hand away from his burn and staggers back.

“You’re going to let me live?”

I can’t fix the world, but maybe he can. “Yes, because you have the burden of guilt. Make this right.”

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BETH

Chapter 36: Beth's Inaugural Speech

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Kubro, Saed, myself...we're alive? I'm alive. An explosion with no charred floors, dented walls, or scattered shrapnel. Am I dreaming?

*Good* *your power is growing.*

*A shame it didn't kill more humans.*

There's a still body before me. Eyelids shut forever. Brain no longer firing. Hair uncharacteristically dishevelled. His dreams of an afterlife stifled by death's permanence. I run my fingers along the lines of his gentle hand, up his arm and cup his cheek. Flat and sterile white. He won't hold me against his chest again. My ears won't press on his heart and listen for his shallow breaths. A father who will never see his child born.

"How's this possible?" Kubro's boisterous voice interrupts my moment.

I ignore his question and give Mitch my attention again. His silent sacrifice a gift to his child. A world without Roth, a man so blind he'd never considered it wasn't his baby. All the while Mitch, blinded by love, saved us without knowing the truth. I pull my G.R.A.Z.I.A. identity tag from my lab coat pocket and place it on his chest.

Saed stands frozen next to Mansyl's pile of ash.

I crawl over to Roth and touch his neck. No pulse.

"You," Saed takes a deep breath, "saved us...you saved us, Beth."

"How? How are we alive?" Kubro interrupts. "Would one of you un-cuff me already?"

Saed edges over to Kubro and clicks the cuff release.

“What now? They release all the Kwewu? The Vice-President steps in, we’re all gently asked to retire?” says Kubro.

G.R.A.Z.I.A. guards storm the room before I can answer. They check Roth’s corpse, ignoring Mitch’s. Guns loaded and aimed, one for each of our heads. Military gestures to one another, confirming death.

“The VP, council and beneficiaries are to meet and discuss who will lead in the interim with Roth deceased.”

“His body’s barely cold and you’re already here?” says Saed.

“You need to come to the meeting room. Now.”

The G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldiers aren’t asking, but who is telling them what to do? We get herded into the meeting room. Roth’s chair left empty. When we arrive, a projection of Vice-President George sits in the seat next to Roth’s. Of course he’s leading the pack already, weak little man wants to inherit Roth’s power. Saed and Kubro sit either side of me. The beneficiaries project in, three of the richest people in the West. Ibina from Rock Power, Rhys from Rhys Pharmaceuticals and Jian from Matter Materials. I’d met them only once or twice, they preferred to be silent partners, making the money, and forcing decisions with Roth’s hand. It would become democratic at this point; we’d all vote for the interim leader.

“We’re here to vote in a temporary leader to take Roth’s place. I myself am happy to step in, being the Vice-President. I will take on his role if everyone is agreeable to this.”

“Agreed,” says Ibina.

“Whatever gets me out of here fastest,” says Rhys. “I have more important meetings to deal with.”

“I have no issue with this proposal,” says Jian.



The death of their leader is meaningless to them. Nothing but losing money scares these soulless twerps.

“Vice-President George...I-I...what are you p-planning t-to...” Saed tries to say.

“What he wants to know is what you plan to do about the fighting in Vivé,” says Kubro.

“That fight is all but over. The wolves are and always have been my allies.”

“T-then, I-I also agree,” says Saed.

“Whatever,” says Kubro. “Do as you wish.”

“Good. Now that’s sorted, Rhys Pharmaceuticals has become aware of synthetic Overdosers being sold in the capital,” says Rhys.

I get up from my seat. “Oh, so you’ve lost a billion of your 597 billion mue profit? And on the illegal Overdosers you leaked into the market after modifying MY nanomachines to stop drug overdose?” I say. “While I love the efficiency of all your formalities, George, you are the last man who can lead. You’re half the reason this war is in such disarray. And you three,” I turn and stare daggers into the beneficiaries. “Rhys, Ibina, Jian; with all your riches, you still won’t win this war. I am sick and tired of you so-called leaders making swift decisions about the world hidden behind your projections and your offices in the middle of the sky.” I make to leave the room. “I’m going to talk to the people, the people who actually live in this city and look up to me. Let’s see what they want.”

“Well, I don’t know about you old coots,” says Kubro. “But I’m with her. This looks like it’s going to be a blast.” Following me out the door.

I enter Roth’s VR office and launch an emergency projection. Inviting the people of the city to join in. It’s slow, but over time people form into a crowd.

I stride towards the podium and undo each button on my lab coat. Kubro stands next to me like a guard. "What're you doing here?" I whisper to him.

"I just love to see chaos play out and you, my dear, are brimming with chaos. I'm not sure how we're alive, or even how Roth is dead at this point, but I am sure that if I stick with you, I'll find more chaos."

George joins the projection. I tap the mic and gain the attention of the crowd. My back straight. Hands rigid. I take a drawn, steady breath.

"You've lost another President," I speak into the mic. The crowd's gaze washes over me gently. "The tragedies never end for you people. First Trudo, then Roth, and now you're at war. I have no doubt that the loss of East Cape caused you all great pain. You had friends, families, loved ones there. But now, the faceless rich beneficiaries and their Vice-President, who might I remind you sent his army to East Cape to die, is sitting in an office at the G.R.A.Z.I.A. headquarters deciding your future. Do you want that? Do you want *them* making decisions about your lives?"

The crowd yells, "No."

"But you do know me. I'm the last connection to your President, to Roth, and I've been here saving your lives with nanotechnology for decades." My eyes pierce the crowd. Fiery. Unflinching. "I'm what you know, and I haven't made any of the mistakes your current leaders have."

I step aside from the podium and pull my lab coat away from my body. I stand to the side and reveal a huge, bloated belly. Kubro's jaw drops to the ground.

"We love you, Beth," screams a woman.

"We want to be like you!" another screams.

“There are two promises I make.” I scan the crowd, meeting eyes with many, and clutch the podium with steady hands. “To build a safe haven at the wall in North Cape and to impregnate those who wish to be. I will give you the gift I was given. Pick me as your leader, and I will do this for you.”

The sound of the crowd screaming is music to my ears. I feel alive. No-one to push me aside this time.

George clears his throat and steps closer to the crowd. “People of the Floating City. As your Vice-President, it is my duty to take over from Roth. I have the experience and connections to rebuild the deep scar he created in your city. To bring us together once again,” says George.

“Says the man whose own city is near destroyed!” I holler. “Who killed his own army!”

George snaps to me, wide-eyed. “This is nothing short of malicious lies. My city was attacked by Roth. The wolves of Vivé could have eaten me alive, but instead they sent me here to bridge the hatred. They are at my back.”

“He wants to bring the Kwewu back here to kill your unborn children. How noble of him. Sacrificing yours for his wolves!”

The crowd growls abuse at George. A kick from my baby reminds me it’s there. My child, you’ve come so far. Don’t worry, it’s not long now.

“Do not believe these lies!” says George. “You are finally at a turning point. A city corrupted by wealth and ignorance; you are at the reigns of genocide. Each and every one of you will have Kwewu blood on your hands if you let Beth control you.”

A sanctimonious speech. What an idiot. “You will be in control for the first time, the freedom to pass on your legacies is within reach. George cannot promise you this and has no intention to save us from extinction. He’d have a world of Kwewu and Kwewu alone. I have set a poll on your PCs. Choose me or the Vice-President as your leader. Pick the leader that will bring you a future.”

Percentages tick up on the blue-green projected screen. Three, four, five percent quickly becomes seventy percent. Goosebumps run up my spine as the numbers climb. George stares at his meagre thirty percent, waiting desperately for more votes. The geographic counter confirms all eligible voters have voted except for a small derelict portion of the city. Even if that entire population chose George, he'd still lose. That's good enough for me. I win.

"Thank you." I smile. "As your new President, I will give you everything you wanted. The procedure for impregnation will be prepared at the base of the Rubric building in two days. I'll see you all there."

The VR projection ends. George's head hangs low. "Ellbray spared my life for nothing."

Ellbray? She's the last person I thought would show George mercy after what he did.

"Now that was impressive," says Kubro with a singular clap. "Certainly not the Beth I saw at the last inaugural speech."

"That Beth is dead." And I have you to thank, Mitch. "Now that I'm in charge, I could send you off to the furthest corner of Cetera and lock you up."

Kubro is silent for once.

"But you know, if you want to be my guard, that would work for me. I've always wanted a human shield."

Kubro smiles. "At your service."

We return to the council room. "At least let me advise," says George. "You can't do this on your own."

"You have outworn your use. Consider yourself an ex-employee of G.R.A.Z.I.A. and don't return to this city. Ever."

“You’ve made a terrible mistake.” George whimpers. “Oust me from this city, but I owe Ellbray and there’s still someone who’d have your head in a heartbeat.”

“You’d best hope that someone doesn’t have your genetically inferior daughter and misfit son in her grasp,” I chuckle. “You really thought Kabel would bail you out?”

Kubro laughs with me. “Oh boy,” he says. “If that bitch has your kids, she’ll make sure they suffer well into their afterlife.”

George’s face drops and his projection disappears in a flicker.

“Come on, Kubro.” I gesture to him. “We have babies to make.”

Kubro lifts an eyebrow. “Sounds like fun.”

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SKAR

Chapter 37: Broken Promise

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I can't tell the difference between a day of mining or a day of building. The central unit has taken shape as a furnace, with the mined Galacktite being shovelled into its centre. The pods look more polished every day, but something bothers me. What Fox said. That the humans can't see the Galacktite.

"Meri." I call to her as we work on a pod together.

She looks around for guards and then replies. "Yes?"

"Fox said the guards can't see the Galacktite, do you know if that's true?"

Meri shrugs.

"It makes no sense. I understand they'd want us to mine it if we're the only ones who can see it, but surely, they could develop technology or machinery to see the mineral and do the job faster. Why use us? Why not cut out the middleman? And what are we building anyway?"

Meri runs her hand along the pod and looks at the design. "The guards were speaking about it, I overheard. They said it was a freezing unit, powered by the Galacktite."

"What are they going to freeze?"

Meri looks around again, body tensing up. "Us."

The crack of a gun against the metal pod interrupts. It rings in my ear, deafening. "You two, split up. *now*," says the watcher. He smashes his gun against my spine, throwing me to the ground and bringing up a splatter of vomit.

For the rest of the day, Meri's out of sight and I don't get a whiff of Verd or Fox nearby either. Last I saw Luria, she had stopped crying. The guards ring the night alarm, allowing us respite

for a few hours before dawn. I leave my pod and huddle into my tiny tent. Meri's tent is close by. I wonder how she's coping. I still owe her for saving Luc. How do you repay something like that? Rustles outside my tent break my train of thought. I peek out.

Luria's fur is split, dishevelled. "I broke my promise, Fox." She picks at her scalp. "This has to end."

Fox reaches out to her, but she springs away. Paws shivering. "What promise? You never promised him anything. You tried to save him, but you have to understand why I killed Fenrir."

Are they talking about Fenrir the Commander of the Vivé army?

"I made a promise right in front of the Wolf God. And I'm being punished for breaking it."

"That's nonsense, my love, there is no Wolf God doling out punishments. This is all Verd's doing."

"Maybe he's a vector for the God Wolf, maybe he's been sent to give us that message. Fox, I can't go on. I just can't."

"Take a deep breath, you're going to hyperventilate."

"Don't touch me!" Luria yells. "There is nothing between us and there never will be again. You're the devil! The devil! A demon of temptation, and I fell for it!"

"What's happened to you? You were smart and grounded." Fox throws his paws up in the air. "You know what, I don't want there to be anything between us. I didn't fall in love with this fanatic."

"You didn't watch someone you love die! And you have no idea how I'm treated around here," she says through thick tears.

"You think I didn't love him? My best friend, the man I grew up with and respected. I loved you both. And I loved him enough to know that ending his life was a mercy. The longer he lived, the more time he had to despair about losing you. And it all would've ended the same anyway, he'd be dead but by someone else's hand. I did him a favour."

"Is that how you see it? You're a good person, huh? A man with morals? Because I seem to recall that you killed him so he wouldn't hunt you down."

"Self-preservation's important too. A lesson Fenrir should've learnt earlier."

"You blame it all on him, don't you? You don't even see that you're a murderer."

"Don't call me that."

"You knew, didn't you?" Her eyes fill with venom. "You knew about East Cape, too."

"Don't speak nonsense."

"You told him not to go. Time and time again. You fooled him but you won't fool me! Whatever mistakes he made was because you didn't tell him the truth."

"You mean whatever mistakes YOU made."

"You're the only mistake I've made."

Fox pauses. "I'm done with this."

I close my tent door and lie back in bed. No wonder Luria was crying for so long; Fox killed her husband. Was he the commander Granma talked about? I wonder if Luc is still awake right now, thinking about me. A life without that little scamp is no life. I wish I could tell him a story. He'd laugh at Verd's stories, especially his misunderstood ones about our home: 'I've known the Floating City to be houses stacked like clouds shivering against strong winds. That city will disappear when the weather clears, just like the clouds in clear skies.' He exaggerates everything.



I wake suddenly, unable to remember when I fell asleep. The sun isn't up yet, but I know the alarm is about to ring. I get dressed and exit my tent, starting early in the feeble hope I won't be sent to the mines. I spot Meri. She catches me staring and furrows her brows. I freeze in place and stare at my toes.

"Do you want something, Skar?"

I gulp as my nerves leave me damp and smelling like old wet cotton. "No, nothing."

The watcher orders me to the mines again, taking this chance to trip me. I hit my elbow on the rocks outside the mine. He laughs and tells me to hurry up. Everything goes as normal, throwing a drill-pick back and forth at black, sparkling pieces of rock. Halfway through, the Galacktite makes a high-pitched screeching noise.

"You hear that?" I ask one of the Kwewu.

"Shhhh," she spits. "We'll get beaten."

Every time I hit the rock; it makes the same disturbing screech. As I get closer to the centre of it, the Galacktite disperses into veins and pulsates. It becomes liquid and I cannot hit it with my drill-pick.

"Hurry up, mine it, dog," the guard growls.

I try again, and again, the Galacktite runs away. Others try too. The Kwewu all stop in sync. Their ears prick. They can hear the screams.

"What are you mutts all staring at?! Hit the bloody rocks!"

"W-We can't. It's running away!"

"What kinda bullshit story is that?" The guard whacks me with the back of his searing blade.

"If you can't mine, then you can rot in the hole."

“I already told you, we can’t!”

The other Kwewu hit the empty ore rocks, terrified of the guards. But I refuse. The rocks sound like they are crying.

“Alright, mongrel. Time to chain you up.”

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**FAYE**

**Chapter 38: The Rebels**

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I get to my feet, toxic wetness dripping off my ankles. It rolls off in shiny baubles and dries in seconds. My eyes buzz around the assailant. A hood, intricately sewn, loose against a body, illuminated by glowing eyes. I face Alice, keeping the mystery person in my peripheral vision.

“Why are you wearing G.R.A.Z.I.A. armour?” I drill my eyes into Alice, scanning every inch of her perfectly golden armour. Alice doesn’t look back.

“I told you, I stole it,” Alice grunts.

“Negative. The probability of stealing from G.R.A.Z.I.A. based on all reported thefts in the last year is 0.24%. Of the total population, 75% are employed by G.R.A.Z.I.A. It is a higher chance that you are a G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldier,” the hooded person replies.

“You must have worked for G.R.A.Z.I.A., then, Alice? Is that true?”

“The way you speak...You’re...” Alice trails off, refusing to make eye contact with either of us.

“Are you a robot or something?” I ask.

“Negative. I am a generation II cyborg. Human and robot.” The hooded person stands straight and winces at her wound. She looks both Alice and me up and down. “But I do not know what either of you are. You are not in my registry.” She pulls out a small laser and sews her wound together.

“Did you work for G.R.A.Z.I.A., Alice? Answer me.”

“That’s not how I got this suit.”

“Then how’d you get it?!” I stamp my foot, flicking some of the water on both the hooded person and Alice’s boots. “Tell me,” I demand.

"I can't tell you in front of this android. You're going to have to trust me for now." Alice sits down on the steps and hunches over, breathing heavily.

"Trust you? Who are you? Tell me who you are!"

"Not now, it's not the time, Faye."

I narrow my eyes. "You won't tell me who you are or why you're helping me, and you expect me to follow you around without question. Until when? Until we find out what I am? Until we go into hiding? Until we take down G.R.A.Z.I.A.?"

"You'll understand soon enough."

Alice sits for a moment in silence. She hangs her head between her knees, still in contemplation. The hooded person tip-toes forward, light as a cat, stalking Alice. As she creeps closer, Alice pulls out her dagger and holds it in the air, waving it in front of the hooded person, taunting her.

"Who are you?" Alice's guard remains high.

"I am model 32487, Gen II, version 1.5."

"Version 1.5? So, you haven't had an update in over a year. What's your name?"

"I named myself Baronette Dizlaryiah Zerpent." She holds her hand out. "My human side is Cretian."

"That's a bit of an antique tongue-twister. Not a popular name with Cretian people anymore."

"Baronette was a famous snake tamer on Red Island. You can refer to me as Diz, should it assist you." She bows. "Do you know now why I attacked you?"

"Of course. Consider it forgotten. Why the hood?" Alice slaps Diz against her shoulder lightly, leaving a red hand print.

"We are not drones, we wear whatever we please. Cretian are not all the same."

"Never mind," Alice sighs and heaves herself off the stairs. Walks slowly down the tunnel.

"We should work together. It is dangerous up above."

"We?" Alice halts and turns back to Diz.

"I detect many G.R.A.Z.I.A. in the vicinity. Travelling in numbers is statistically safer."

"Roth put a bounty on my friend here. I'd have to agree with you."

"Negative. Roth is dead."

"He's— what?"

"Murdered. His partner has offered to rule in his stead."

"Beth?" I say. Her name dries out my tongue.

"Affirmative."

"If he didn't order the bounty..." then Beth did. I look to the ground. Tears well in my eyes.

"No concrete feelings?" Diz bows.

"You mean hard feelings?" Alice laughs and puts a soft hand on my back. "I'm sorry about this detour, Faye. We have to go now." She walks fast down the tunnel, towing me along.

I can sense Diz's emotions. She seems, excited? Beth betrayed me, why would she do that? Alice isn't human under all that armour, so what is she? Is she using me?

"It is sunshine to meet you." Diz waves as she catches up to me. "I wish it was not in a sewer. And you, unknown creature, are named Faye?"

“Yeah. In all my twenty years, with only books and television and word of mouth to go on, I’ve never heard of the Cretian people.”

“Red Islanders, they call them. And there aren’t many of them left,” Alice says.

“G.R.A.Z.I.A. erased our name, our history,” says Diz. “Cretians existed here one thousand nine hundred and fifty-two years ago, descendants of humans. No longer able to breed with them as the genetic gap between the two became too wide. The Cretians retain a wireless connection to the planet that humans lack.” Diz beckons us down the tunnel. “I have a safehouse. You can stay there as long as you need.”

Alice analyses Diz for a moment. “Cretians were never a big fan of the government. You attacked me because you thought I was a member of G.R.A.Z.I.A.’s armed guard, and you’re a G.R.A.Z.I.A. made android that hasn’t been updated in over a year. It seems to me like you might not be a big fan of our beloved Beth.”

“Affirmative.”

Diz stops and leans against the wall and rolls up her sleeves. “I will continue in two minutes.” She reveals a greyish furry wrist and claw-like hands.

“You’re a Kwewu? Not a Cretian. That’s why you wear the hood?”

Diz nods up and down, resting her head in a downward position.

“You’re a third dog, a third Cretian and a third robot?”

“Kwewu are not dogs. We are wolves.” Diz turns her gaze to Alice, her eyes a softer, drained green. “Alice, I do not want to see Kwewu slaughtered above and enslaved in the North.”

“Neither do I,” Alice replies.

“I told this to the Rebel Kwewu after reprogramming myself.”

"I see."

"When the Rebel Kwewu asked me to lead them, I said yes."

Alice is still. Grim.

"What weapon does Faye possess?"

"There's few people we can trust with this information. Faye is as good as dead if G.R.A.Z.I.A. sniffs us out. How do I know this information is safe with you?"

"I'll show you the Rebel hideout."

"Show me your hideout and I will tell you exactly who Faye is."

I shuffle uncomfortably. Alice locks on to me. "As long as Faye agrees."

I am silent for a moment. The opportunity sounds inviting. My curiosity piques. "I agree to it."

"Very well."

Diz leads us further into the maze and throws her gloved hand into the puzzle of bricks on one wall. One brick missing from the centre. I edge closer and investigate the hole. Diz's hand sinks into translucent blue jelly. A red line forms around the creases of her fingers. Diz presses her back against the end of the wall and gestures us to follow. Alice follows immediately. I stand there for a moment. Two tip-toed steps and I'm against the wall too. And then I'm underneath it. Enveloped in unnatural light. Warmed by burning LEDs. Wooden stairs lead lower. Sconces scattered along the walls, flattening our shadows. Alice's crunching armour is louder than ever in this tiny space. Diz leads and Alice follows down the narrow passageway. My blood pressure spikes. The walls are crushed tightly together like the trash compactor that nearly ate me. The stairs lead down below the ground like the prison that destroyed me. My leg muscles crumple over each other. Tangle together. Diz is gone, but Alice stops. Turns back and looks at me. Holds out a gloved, golden hand. I wet my

dry mouth with a swallow and push my heart back down my throat. I grab Alice's hands and take small, careful strides down into the underground.

The path is endless, identical steps coiled tightly enough to make you dizzy. The last sconce marks the end of the stairs and the beginning of an open space. Wooden too. Lit by chandeliers. Diz marches us in and stands to the side. Reveals us from the curtain of her body. On show for a circle of people, all wearing a hood not unlike Diz's. Diz moves to the centre of the room and faces the other hooded creatures. She presses her hands together in prayer, slides them down and pulls them apart, waving in a circular motion above her head. They respond with the same.

"Please give our guests Alice and Faye a sunshine welcome." She points to us. "I confirm that they are allies."

I scan the crowd. All similar bar a few patched, frayed, and miscoloured hoods. I nervously shove a piece of hair into my mouth. Strands stuck in my teeth. Alice raises a metallic arm and waves it loosely.

"They would like to add themselves to our cause. We could use more RAM in our CPU."

I step forward. Gain control of my trembling hands.

"We fight the same fight," I say.

Alice flicks her head to me. My words whip at her like wind. Diz spins toward me. Robotically stiff.

"This is the time to reveal your specifications."

I turn to Alice and nibble at my pink lips. She nods.

"I—." I've never said it out loud before. "I'm—" How can I put this? "Well, I was..." No, that's no good.



"A prisoner." Alice interrupts.

The crowd gasps. Diz gestures and they quieten.

"Of G.R.A.Z.I.A." I gulp. "I'm not a felon. I..." Why would they believe me?

"Continue, child. G.R.A.Z.I.A. is friend to none here." A low, soft voice speaks from the crowd of hoods.

"I was imprisoned by G.R.A.Z.I.A. from birth. For twenty years. Tortured and isolated from the world. Asked to provide information about a weapon I knew nothing about. I'm a fugitive on the run. Beth won't stop until she has me behind bars again, until she has her precious weapon. So, I can hide for the rest of my life, or I can beat her."

A grating silence fills the room. Glares sharp as knives penetrate my skin. Lodge into my heart and brain. Right through my face and skull. My cheeks burn. I look to my feet. The hoods step forward in slow march. One foot. One foot. One foot. All in perfect unison. Claps break the silence. I look up. Furry paws escape their hoods and clap in waves. Alice's armoured hands follow the beat. Diz's leathered hands too.

"Brave to tell the story, lass, even braver to face that demon woman," a stern voice assures.

Diz nods and they all remove their hoods. She reveals a beautifully sculpted grey face with a soft snout and tiny white whiskers sprouting from each cheek. Shiny, ginger hair drapes around her body, hugs her hips. Pinned, pointed ears perk as the hood sets them free. One tiny wrinkle, a brushstroke on her forehead.

The Kwewu with the low voice has black-grey fur splotched with pure white, drooping whiskers and tiny almond shaped eyes, dulled by time.

The stern voice is mink, fire-red. His snout is long and tipped with a leather nose. His claws are razors, his body crafted with muscle.

“We are the AVR, the Anti-Lethal Violence Rebellion. We understand your predicament. It is late. Shall we shut down and reboot when the planet finishes its rotation?” Diz asks.

A Kwewu half Diz’s height flows through the open jaws of the wooden double-doors. The blue-grey fur on his head is spiked into a mohawk and dishevelled elsewhere. He makes his way across the room. Human legs trying to catch his wolf-like torso.

“Diz, a group of new recruits have arrived.” His tiny voice speaks in a high crackly pitch.

“That is positive news. Please ask recruit 1707 to greet them.”

“Uhh, which one was that again?” The child scrapes its index claw against his head nervously.

“Peter Bwyn, age fifteen, 145 cm tall, orange hair.”

“Peter! Right, on it!”

The Kwewu child waddles off, fluffy tail wagging in tow.

“Before we go to bed, let’s hear your plan.” Alice crosses her arms.

Diz shapes her hands into a circle and bows. The other Kwewu exit the room swiftly.

“Negative. This information is classified. You will be required to prove yourself and become a recruit before this knowledge is uploaded into your hard drive.”

“That wasn’t the deal, Diz.”

“I will tell you who I am, as you have told me the same, Faye. This was the deal.” Diz looks at Alice. A statue.

Alice turns to me briefly. Her mind ticks over.

“Tell me your specifications or leave.” Diz demands in a gruff voice.

"Fine," Alice says and exits the room.

Diz loosens her tense muscles and walks closer to me. She sits crossed legged and waves me down too. Gem-green eyes stare into mine. Gleaming stronger than stars.

"I was constructed before the Cretians were exiled from their motherland to Red Island. The scientists who programmed me designed the first Kwewu android. Kwewu are warriors. Robots are too. The President wanted both to fight for him, but he also wanted the knowledge of the Cretians. My programming was not accurate." The soft pad of her paw meets the thick, calloused skin on my hand. She knits her fingers between mine. "I reprogrammed myself and left the laboratory. I learned two things: I could travel on foot for multiple days and I could scan where G.R.A.Z.I.A. drones were. I travelled around the drones. This is the reason I came into the sewer; I was concerned that the drones were here to attack the Rebel sanctuary. When I first arrived here, the Vice-President did not live in Vivé. Vivé was still Kwewu land. I was safe for a short time, but many Kwewu distrusted me. When war erupted above, I took as many Kwewu as I could into these sewers and asked them to join the Rebels. We hide here and plan. But we will not hide forever, and if you are a Rebel too, you will not need to hide either."

"G.R.A.Z.I.A. took my entire life from me. They took my identity. I have nothing, no family, no home; I don't even know what I am. I could be human, or Kwewu, or android, or something else entirely." My hand squeezes Diz's paw. "Before I can help you, I have to go to the lab and find out what I am. I have to know."

Clunks from the darkness reveal Alice walking back into the room.

"Where did you learn about the Cretians? There is no history of which you speak," Alice says.

"That is classified information."

"Hmph." Alice's metal suit scuffs the wooden floor. "You knew I was out there listening. Wolf hearing, sight, smell. Why did you continue?"

“I wanted to hear Faye’s voice without yours to lead it.”

I shoot a glance at Alice and then back into the misty jade eyes perched between Diz’s fuzzy snout. Lose myself in them. I hold Diz’s paw tighter.

“Tell me one thing, Diz,” says Alice. “The stories about East Cape, is it true the Kwewu army killed even the civilians?”

Diz shakes her head. “This is not the story the commander tells. His words speak of G.R.A.Z.I.A. betrayal. A planned ambush.”

“Were there any survivors?”

“Not that we have located.” Diz’s eyes burn. “I wish you would join us now. We mustn’t wait much longer, or the Kwewu at North Cape will suffer or be terminated.”

“Faye,” Alice starts and leans over me, “the lab can wait.”

I shake my head. “No, it can’t.”

“I process this and understand your answer.”

Diz helps me to my feet and grazes past Alice in the hall as she walks us through the large wooden doors. She leads me down another narrow path. As the winding comes to a halt, she waves her paw over a receiver in the middle of the door. The door opens on its own.

“You can stay here.” Diz waves to the beds and disappears into the depths of the winding hall.

Alice exhales and collapses onto straw pillows and silken sheets. A fake fireplace with heat sizzling from its core adorns the centre of the room. I curl up in front of it and lay my bare, pale hands against the blazing red. Rocking back and forth. Enough so that I fall into a dream.

Pulsating redness. Flesh encased in more flesh. Blue and purple liquid drizzle on top. I move.  
I'm here. I'm not anymore. Greys and whites.

*Hello again.*

"Not you... leave me alone."

*It has been too long child. Come on, you have talked to these ones and they want the humans dead too.*

*Would you. Do what you were meant to. ALREADY. Kill Them All.*

"I'm not a killer."

*No matter. Someone will kill them. Maybe your little sister.*

*I'll assure it.*

I jolt upright. Eyes open. Alice is gone. I wander the halls, still dotted with sweat, and bump into Diz who's midway through a conversation with another rebel member.

"Why didn't any of you tell me everyone calls it G.R.A.Z.I.A. for short? I've been wasting my RAM spouting Generation of Resource Acquisition with Zero International Aggregates for decades!"  
Diz smiles as she notices me. "Oh, good sunshine Faye. Alice is consuming at this current time."

"Can I talk to you? In private?"

"Affirmative." She gestures to the rebel and leads me down the hall and into her room.

"Is it hard to be so unique?"

"Do you refer to my Cretian/Android/Kwewu status?"

"Yeah."

"It was hard, yes. When I escaped, I found not one person exactly matching my specifications."

"One of a kind?"

She nods. "I did think I was all alone, but I'm part Kwewu, part android, and part Cretian, and that means I can relate to almost everyone in Cetera. I think it makes me more connected to them."

"That's an interesting way of seeing it."

"It is perhaps the only way to see oneself, as connections in a large network, much as the planet functions. The Kwewu in Vivé despised me, but then I showed them this sanctuary in their time of need, and now, somehow, I am their leader. It is fascinating how one's life can change overnight."

"You're telling me." I stop in the hall for a moment, thinking about Diz and the warmth that emanates from her body. Even from the metal android parts. "You lit up when you said it. The planet. What did you mean when you said that the planet works as a large network?"

"Cretians once had the ability to converse with Cetera. To understand its whims and wishes. Nature follows them wherever they go. This is why Red Island is so picturesque. The planet and all its parts send messages to its centre, to inform it of the happenings above and help it decide its next steps. Think of it as a kind of telepathy. Internal messaging."

Is that voice, the voice that keeps telling me to kill the humans, is it the planet? "What does the planet sound like?"

"This information is not stored in my memory. I do apologise. I have not been able to converse with Cetera. It chooses its vectors with great care."

"It seems like you would be a great choice for the planet." I find Alice in the common room. "We have to go," I say.

"You don't sound so sure," she replies. "You like it here."

"It's underground, small, the lights are dim, everything's cramped. It's too much like home.  
Half of my heart wants to stay here. But the stronger half wants to go."

"Then we must go." Alice directs her words to Diz.

"Do not be out of range too long. We could use strong people in this fight," says Diz.

"You gave us somewhere safe to stay. I won't forget it. I want to help the Kwewu."

"Then good sunshine to you both."

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LILLY

### Chapter 39: Ice Bunnies

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Verne, Khalid and me leave the mansion. Khalid finds a square door under some sand and hops in. When he gets to the bottom of the ladder, he holds his arms out for me.

"I'm going back home." I poke out my tongue.

"Your Dad won't be there. The door's locked, anyway."

"Fine then." I place my hands on my hips. "I'll stay at the beach forever."

"This isn't a game; we have to go now, or we might not live long enough to come back home."

I turn away from Khalid and hear his sigh echo from the tunnel.

"You'll get to see the ice rabbits," says Verne.

"The bunnies? I'll get to see them?"

"Of course. Now jump down. It won't be far to walk."

I hop down and Khalid catches me. Verne follows behind. We go through a long curling tunnel coloured like before Dad went bald, dust grey. At the end we find a ship that floats a little bit above the water. Khalid helps me in the door and asks Verne to follow him a little away from me. I can't hear or see them well, but they talk for a bit. Khalid pulls something from his pocket, and then Verne lies down on the ground.

"Is Verne coming?"

"No, he's taking a rest."

"Now? We shouldn't leave without him. Dad said for him to come with us."



“Verne told me to. You know him, all duty and honour.”

I was hoping to pat the bunnies with Verne. He’s always good at getting animals to trust him. I want to cry, but Khalid will just make fun of me.

Khalid takes the wheel of the ship. He drives across the sea. It rocks like squiggly lines when the wind blows outside, but he tries hard to keep it straight. As the ship goes faster and faster, the outside becomes like cloud streaks after a plane flies by. When he slows down, I see big pointy triangles made of ice, lots of them, all on land. The sea freezes at the shore, and the land is whiter than the clouds. I don’t see any silver buildings or any wolf people or any humans neither.

“That’s South Kabel,” Khalid says as he points. “But we’re not going there yet.”

“Why not?” I notice two floppy looking ears poking through the snow. “I want to see the bunnies! I’ve never seen them. Verne said!”

“You don’t always get what you want.”

“Dad would’ve taken me.”

Khalid smashes on the brakes and I rattle in my seat, but my seatbelt whips me back. He turns to me, hands still on the wheel, and flares his ugly nostrils.

“Dad isn’t here,” he growls, staring at me for a long time.

I cross my arms and slouch into my seat. He restarts the ship and drives on the land. We spend some more time in the car, it feels like a hundred years at least, until we find a place to put it. This land has no snow, it’s all made of ice. Ice like mirrors, I can see my blonde hair and blue eyes.

Khalid and a lot of men in metal suits meet at the dock.

“You’d better hope you have permission to be here, boy, or you’ll stay a boy forever once Lord Kabel’s done with you,” the metal man says.

“No-one’s dumb enough to travel here without permission.”

Khalid shows them something, but I can’t see it.

“Another day attached to your manhood. Lucky boy.”

They walk away, they look less angry now.

Khalid holds my hand along paths that aren’t like home. They’re black with lines of silver, but more dull than the Silver South. My arms and body shake, my lips feel swollen and kind of wet. Khalid pulls a hat and scarf from his bag and throws them at me. I miss the weather at home, this is way too cold.

Khalid takes me up a long set of shiny stairs to the top of a ginormous tall building, taller than my house. Dark, swirling like a tower in a fairy-tale, pinching at the skies like my brother did to my cheeks. Before he got boring. At the top of the stairs, a pretty lady sits on her chair. I like her sparkly purple nails. Maybe she’ll show me how she does them. Khalid kneels when he sees her and shoves me down to kneel too, I don’t know why. She’s not *that* pretty.

“Is this her?” she asks, staring at me.

“Yes, Lord Kabel.”

The lady walks down the steps from her chair. She makes clapping noises as her heels touch the floor.

“You please me more each day. For a man of weak birth, you have some stones to go this far for a place in my kingdom.”

Khalid bows his head lower to the ground.

“You have your wish. A place in North Kabel.”

“What will we do next?”

"There is no we, only you. Do the Capes know of your defection?"

What's a defection? Something yuck?

"Not yet."

"I think you should pay a kind visit to your friends at West Cape." The lady kneels and looks at me. "Do you like being a princess?"

"I love it!" I jump to my feet and spin around holding out my dress and then I curtsy. Khalid bites his lip and I hear him growl. "Dad says I'm his little princess, but I need a crown."

"The Lord doesn't want to hear about your dad, get back down." Khalid hisses at me.

"No." Lord Kabel waves. "I like a rebellious soul." She licks her lips. "I have a wonderful crown you can wear to show off in the West." The lady shares a long look with Khalid. "Do you know what to do?"

"I understand," he says.

"Take this, so you don't catch it." She passes out two capsules, dark green in colour.

"Take it, Lilly."

"Is it food?"

"Candy," he says. "Swallow it."

We both swallow it. "Ick, it has no flavour! Lady, this is terrible."

Khalid's eyes get all bulgy like our robot fish used to.

The lady smiles and bends down in front of me. She puffs my cheeks together. "You're going to be a princess who brings the fires of hell with her everywhere she goes."

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FAYE

**Chapter 40: Regeneration and Destruction**

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We emerge from the sewers. A stream of oxygen flows down my throat and a gentle wind blows the hair away from my neck. Alice follows. Her gold armour knocks against the ladder and dings against the hatch as she closes it. Flecks of desert sand cling to my skin and brush through my eyelashes.

I lived there all my life, encased in a tomb below ground, but I have no idea how to get back in.

"There's nowhere to take cover here." Alice scans the vast, hot emptiness around us. "I don't like it." She cautiously takes the lead. "Keep a keen eye."

"Can you explain to me what happened with Beth?"

"She got pregnant to President Roth. They claim the Kwewu caused human infertility, inciting war."

"The humans can't procreate?"

"As of late, all of them are infertile. Nowadays, most children are clones."

"And it's because of the Kwewu?"

"That's what Beth says."

"But you don't believe her?"

"She doesn't often speak truths."

The wind presses against us like a wall of thick oil. Our feet sink. We trudge through as the wind doubles in speed. Step by step, the sandstorm spins around us. Alice clasps my wrist and pulls

me into her. She wraps her arms around me and wrenches me into a kneel. Her voice sounds raspy.

“Stay as low as you can, cover your eyes and mouth. When it stops, we run for it.”

I put my hands over my face and condense myself into a ball. With Alice hovering over me, it gets sticky and humid quick. Through the slits in Alice’s helmet, I hear her puffing. It must be a million degrees in there. “You okay?” I ask.

“I think...” her arms jitter, a great statue collapsing at its foundation. “I think some sand has jammed a vent.” She puffs. “I’m heating up. I n-eed your help.” She pants. A voice filled with humidity.

“What can I do?”

She slides to one side, leaving me exposed. Sand flies into my throat and slips along my wet eyeballs. She flattens herself on the sand, face down. Sinks into it like quicksand.

“I-in my arm flap, there’s a screwdriver.”

I scramble to my knees and shave through the sand. The flap on her arm cracks open and reveals a small pouch with a screwdriver inside.

“The plate... behind my neck.”

I pull myself upright and find a small flap behind her neck and tap on it. “This one?” I say.

“Unjam the fan.”

I carefully take off the screws and open the plate. There’s a little fan inside, caked in sand, struggling to turn. Blowing on the fan isn’t the smartest idea. I spit out dust and rub my eyes bloodshot.

“Inside there’s... a little vacuum.”

My cheeks burn. I see a tiny metal device hooked to the left of the fan and turn it on. It pushes the clump of wet sand out of the fan and the cogs below. I look through the holes in the fan and I can see a glimpse of white skin. Real flesh and blood behind the armour. I want to reach out and touch it.

“Done yet?” She breathes heavily.

“Yes, sorry.” I start the fan and shut the plate. Alice rolls back into a hunched position. The fan breathes air into her suit.

“Pretty poor design, isn’t it?” I say.

She turns her helmet towards me. I sense a sour glare and hear a slight grunt.

“The storm’s calming, let’s go.”

We arrive at the underground lab after a long trek. Alice is silent the entire time. She points to a large tap-shaped vent snaking out from underground. “Back through more sewage?” I say.

“Trash chute,” she says. “You’ll have to slide in and open the entry elevator for me.”

“Me?”

“I won’t exactly fit now, will I? When you get in, leave the room and click the elevator call button at the end of the hall.”

I swallow the mucous in my throat and shuffle inside the opening of the vent. Alice lifts me by my feet just high enough for me to slide over the bend. It sucks me up to the top and I flail into a hot, airless room and a pile of medical waste. I push aside empty capsules and loose injectables, jumping over sharps and rolling through the exit. Cameras line each hall. The lack of chatter and marching guards unsettles me. I find the call button and send the elevator to the surface. It clinks and grumbles like it hasn’t been used in a while. I wait for the doors to open and let Alice in. She

looks at a small computer projected from her wrist. "Power is on, automated security measures are running, but I don't see any signs of human life."

"Beth's gone," I say. "As is her sister." Why am I disappointed?

"You can sense it?"

"Yeah." When Beth or Ribbon are around, I always get a feeling in the pit of my stomach, a nervousness. I don't feel it here.

"Where do you want to go?" Alice asks.

"To Beth's lab."

"It's this way." She points to her left.

"How do you know your way around?"

"I told you, I worked for Beth."

Something still feels off about Alice. She tells only part of her story.

We make our way to Beth's lab. It's empty, pristine, not a screen or piece of lab equipment out of place. Her PC is locked. Alice strolls in and pulls off her gauntlet, revealing a dainty, pale hand. She presses it into the DNA scanner and the PC unlocks.

"How did you do that?"

"I've always been able to do it." She puts her gauntlet back on.

Whenever I ask her something, she glosses over the explanation, like it's nothing special. But whatever Alice is under all that armour is incredibly special.

I take my time and read Beth's research entries extensively. Alice looks uncomfortable. Claustrophobic. She paces behind me.

"You know, walking back and forth won't make this go any faster," I say.

"This is a waste of time."

"Listen to this," I wait for Alice to make eye contact before returning my gaze to the document in my hand. It feels odd reading about myself like this. "'The specimen' ...meaning me... was found near a crashed spaceship. The spaceship had no door or buttons. It was black with a green pulsating line through it. What appeared to be an escape pod lay five kilometres away from the ship. As lead researcher Sarah-Mae approached the pod, it hatched into a jelly like substance. The substance moulded quickly into an infant with the exact same eye, hair, and skin colour as Sarah-Mae. Our initial indications were incorrect, the escape pod was in fact a gestational egg and hatched an alien creature. Its DNA matched Sarah-Mae's and as Subject Nineteen grew, it looked more and more like her."

"Happy now?"

"Not yet." I hold my finger up. "The lab reports stop mentioning Sarah-Mae after a time. Why's that?"

"I don't know."

"I don't remember Sarah-Mae. She must've stopped working on the project when I was young. Is there a way to find out about her?"

"When someone disappears from G.R.A.Z.I.A.'s records, you can be assured their cause of death won't be true."

"The death database, of course!" I scan through the records. A comprehensive database of every entity on Cetera that has died, including their medical history, DNA, and cause of death. "Says she died in a lab accident."

"G.R.A.Z.I.A. PR buries the dirt."



"You think she was killed?"

Alice nods.

"Check this out. It says here they cut my whole arm off and it grew back in a few days."

"You can regenerate. Can we go now?"

"They isolated me in a completely empty, soundless room and I was still able to learn, implying I have another sense that humans don't." I flick past a few benign reports. "The subject speaks of an 'entity' that contacts her through what only can be assumed is telepathy but there is no current technology that can measure these interactions so it is unclear if these are real interactions between the alien species and its kin or the delusional musings of an isolated child."

"This knowledge isn't going to help you. There's a war going on out there and this is not the place to mill around when you're being hunted."

"It says here there are others like me." I turn away from the screen. "You know, part of me hoped Beth and G.R.A.Z.I.A. were here. To take me into their custody and force their future upon me. Then, I could just sit here in the comfort of the known instead of trudging into this unknown. But after reading all this, I can't deny my future."

The lab door flings open. White fur and crystal blue eyes. I recognise her, it's the Kwewu that saved me in Vivé. Ellbray.

"You again?" says Alice.

"I remember you, from the Silver South. You tried to save the Kwewu child," says Ellbray, staring at me and blatantly ignoring Alice.

"And you rescued me and killed the G.R.A.Z.I.A. guards." I sense a great power from within Ellbray.

“Are you the weapon?”

“Her name is Faye,” says Alice. “And what she is, is none of your business.”

“I’m Ellbray.” Ellbray’s eyes move back to mine. “I was looking for you all this time. Who knew we’d already met. Beth told me a lot about you.”

I edge closer to Ellbray. “You knew Beth?”

“I was charged with protecting her. I got her out of the capital and back here, but it seems she’s returned there.”

“But you’re not here for Beth, are you? Spit it out,” says Alice. “You look oddly similar to the President’s only Kwewu henchman.”

“Beth’s lost her mind, taking on Roth’s legacy as her own. The Vice-President has no power to stop her. I want—no, the Kwewu *need* your help. Red Island have ties to Lord Kabel, let’s make a deal with them to save my people from being tortured and enslaved in North Cape.”

“You want to trade Faye for peace? She’s a person, not a weapon,” says Alice.

“I’ve heard of Red Island,” I say. “They say it’s beautiful and warm and full of life.”

“It’s all true.”

“You want me to go to Lord Kabel, a trade for Kwewu freedom?”

“The Red Island council had plans to make this deal long ago.”

Alice’s golden gloved hands are tight around her sword handle. “Alice,” she shuffles in place.

“I promised Diz I’d help them. This can’t be chance, Ellbray and I meeting here, the deal with Lord Kabel. This is what I’m meant to do. This is how I can help the Kwewu and repay Diz.”

“It’s a trap, Faye. Red Island only care about themselves. You’re going to be used and sold like property. If Red Island wanted to make the trade, what stopped them?”

“You, Faye, the bargaining chip, escaped. Vice-President George lost control of his army. Red Island want the Capital back. Something we can help with once the Kwewu are freed.”

A large projection wakes up in the middle of our conversation. It creates a perfect clone of Beth, who walks, translucent, towards us all.

“What a wonderful gathering. My various experiments all in one place,” Beth says and addresses Alice. “I knew something suspicious was happening the moment I couldn’t get hold of you, Alice. You threw away the radio, didn’t you?”

“What do you want?” I ask.

“I sense a tone. Something wrong?”

“You put a bounty on me!”

“Insurance. I don’t want you interfering with my plans.” She eyeballs Ellbray. Her voice changes. “Ell, why did you have to come here? You could’ve lived free, hidden yourself somewhere far away. I don’t need a debt to a dog to weigh me down.”

“Hiding isn’t freedom. You killed Roth. He deserved to die, but why are the Kwewu still imprisoned? Why are you doing this?”

“The Kwewu have a bigger role in this. Who do you think was pulling Roth’s strings? Those plans of his were mine. This is your chance, Ell, a life for a life, I’ll let you escape if you promise never to return. Don’t go after the Kwewu in the North, don’t show your face ever again, and don’t come after me.”

Ellbray is quiet for only a few seconds. “You know I can’t do that.”

“Then I can’t let you live, Ellbray.” She turns back to Alice, still ignoring me. “Oh Alice, it pains me even more to end you. The failed experiment turned success. I should’ve guessed you’d have a soft spot for Faye.”

"You can't stand that we've all defied you!" I scream. "You think you own us, like you're our mother, or some god, but you've lost control!"

"Don't you worry, Faye." Beth's gaze finally meets mine. "You'll survive this and be incapacitated long enough for my soldiers to pick up the pieces. But I can't leave the rest of this evidence lying around here, and I can't exactly send anyone to clean it up. Alas." She sighs. "I'll have to end you all. I called to warn because the scientist in me wants to see if you can escape. Test your limits. Ciao." She disappears, and a loud siren rings.

"Self-destruction in three minutes," it says in a robotic tone.

Alice squeezes my arm. We rush through the maze-like corridors as the halls behind us crash into dust. The history of Beth, G.R.A.Z.I.A., the planet, me, all being crushed, deep underground where no one will find it again. Falling debris barrel into Ellbray, but she scrambles to her feet. With each swift turn, a new pathway gets blocked as the structural integrity of the lab crumbles. Alice leads us, the only one with knowledge of the layout, and we follow without hesitation. She takes us through an invisible wall. We climb into an elevator. The buttons don't work. She kicks the roof hatch open and we climb an endless ladder as the sides of the structure fall away. Death tails us with every gasping breath. Alice jumps to the land above, grabs me and throws me up. She does the same for Ellbray.

As the dust clears, the huge gaping hole in the ground becomes visible. Emptiness and shrapnel fill it like a junkyard.

"I'm sorry, Alice." I sigh and hold my hand over my thumping heart. "Beth has made my decision even easier. I'm going with Ellbray."

"There are other ways to fight this. You don't have to go."

I smile. "I do."

“I can’t go with you, my G.R.A.Z.I.A. armour will have me captured in seconds. Do you really trust her?”

“I trust Ellbray.” I press my hand against Alice’s armoured glove. “There is something within me, another sense. Analysing every molecule within every life. Whatever it is, it can tell that Ellbray is genuine.”

“Then I guess you have to go.”

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LILLY

### Chapter 41: The Pretty Crown

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We stay the night in the pretty lady's mansion. I get dark purple sheets, soft like rabbit fur. I can't sleep well without Dad tucking me in. When I get bored, I try on the crown the Kabel lady gave me. It is the most beautiful thing I've seen since the flowers at Red Island. Spiky, but full of crystals that shine like the sun. One of them is red like a ruby, it twinkles even more bright than the others. I salute in the mirror and curtsy.

"What are you doing?" Khalid snaps. He jolts out of bed and rips the crown from my head, pulling out some of my hair. "Be careful with that. Get dressed," he demands.

I put on my pretty white daisy dress with frills at the bottom. Dad got me this dress to take photos with the President, the one before that Roth guy. "I miss Dad."

"We're going now." Khalid opens the door where another one of those metal guys is standing straight. They look like robots.

"I'll show you to your ship."

"We have one."

"But not a royal one. Lord Kabel insists."

The man takes us through the big winding mansion. Much bigger than Dad's one, but his has more light. We find the ship and it looks no better than our other ship.

"It can't be traced back to you."

"Right." Khalid waves the man away. "Get in, Lilly."

I creep into the passenger side. "It smells!"

Khalid slams and locks the door. He gets in and speeds away from shore.

“Now, when you get there, you will smile and greet everyone like when the public relations representatives visited Vivé. Let them pick you up or hug you or whatever they want, but don’t let them touch the crown, got it?”

“Duh, I’m way better than you at it.”

“Yeah.” He laughs. “That’s why she chose you.”

“I wish Dad could see me. And Mamma, do you remember when she made me that crown out of shells?”

“No.”

I haven’t been to West Cape since I was three years old. The only thing I could remember was that Dad’s dad lived here and his house always smelled like it had never been cleaned. Oh! And Dad’s dad had a stubbly chin. Khalid takes us to the docks. There’s only one sub there and it has holes in the sides. My foot nearly falls through the wood planks as we try to walk to the land.

A messy looking lady comes running towards us. “Lovely to...” she pauses to burp. “...meetcha.” She fumbles down the walkway and flops an arm out at Khalid. “Welcome to Inops, capital of the West Cape. Always good to have a political figure round here.” She smells like Dad’s whiskey glass.

Khalid swats her hand away. “This is about Lilly, gather the townspeople.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n.” She salutes and stumbles sideways, holding onto the wall for support. “Sorry, long morning.” She speaks into a small device on her arm. It’s like the one Dad uses to speak to Vivé without leaving the house.

“Townspeople of the West, please gather in the plaza. We have a special guest here. Lilly, the Vice-President’s daughter.”

“Good.”

“She’s even wearing a bloody crown.” The mayor giggles and wobbles off.

“I’m so excited!”

“Keep your cool.”

Khalid leads me down the path toward the plaza. The bricks don’t meet each other and I can see dirt on top and between them. The houses are made of metal but not pretty, shiny metal. They’re dull like rocks. The people don’t wear nice clothes like in Vivé; some of their clothes are ripped and their hair is not brushed like mine. I usually get lots of smiles and kind looks from people in Vivé, but these ones keep staring at me with frowns on their faces. Why aren’t they excited to see me? I pull on Khalid’s shirt.

“I’m scared,” I whisper.

“Keep walking,” he says.

One of the men in the crowd darts into the centre of the plaza and stops us before we reach it.

“Better ‘ave brought more than a little girl and a crown worth half a credit. Unless you’re willin’ to sell ‘er for more ‘an that?”

Khalid knocks the man down and shoves his boot on top of him. “Know your place,” he snarls.

The mayor steps in and yells at the man. “Get outta here, Loui, you’ve got a wife at home. Our friends are here today as a visit of respect so if y’all want better conditions in West Cape you oughta treat ‘em with respect. Their father has the power to help us.” The mayor seems a bit better than before. She walks straighter, and next to us.



"Her father ain't shit," says Loui. "That Beth lady cut him out." The man scurries away.

He doesn't know my Dad at all!

I wave at the people, but only the children wave back. One little girl, covered in dirt, smiles at me. I walk to her.

"You are very pretty!" I say.

She turns red. "Th-thank you, I hope your father can help us. My mamma told me he has enough money to give us all a new house."

"Of course!" I hold her hand. "Dad can do anything."

Khalid snatches me back and talks quietly to the mayor as we walk through the crowd.

"I assume you want money, or maybe more resources?"

"Of course, what mayor wouldn't? I'm not concerned how or where the money comes from, and I'm sure your father isn't either. Can you make us a deal?"

"George wouldn't be rich if he gave his money to irresponsible morons like you."

"Hey now, there's no need for name-calling. Why did you come here and make this big show then?"

"It certainly wasn't to please you and your people."

"Well, people like Loui are the bread and butter of the West. Why don't I get a few more and see if we can't snatch a precious little girl and barter her for some cash. Would George pay for that?"

"It's funny, I pegged you for a spineless idiot but a threat like that takes some gall."

"Oh, come on, I'm sure we can work out a better deal. The longer she stays here, the less princess she'll become."

"You do have a knack for turning things to shit. I came here for a reason, you know."

"Enlighten me, boy."

"I came to wipe away the stain on the West. More specifically, *your* stain on the West."

"This must be the first time someone's likened my city to filth. You catch more bees with honey, you know."

"Or in your case, flies."

"I don't know how a little twerp and a boy plan to take us on, but you chose a beautiful day to die in a strange place."

Khalid and the mayor stop, so I stop too. Why does he have to fight with everyone? He grabs the crown from my head and throws it on the floor.

"Hey! What're you doing to my crown? Meanie."

He holds his hand out and pushes it into my forehead so I can't reach for my crown.

"I plan to take you on with this," he says.

"A crown?" The mayor giggles. "You hiding a little army in there?"

Khalid smirks and the mayor stops smiling.

"You're either mad or—"

"I'm not mad." He stamps on the crown.

A thick gas leaks from the broken ruby and spreads into the air, moving through the crowd fast. The people cough and the little girl from before drops to her knees. I run over to her. She's now lying flat on the brick.

"Hey!" I shake her. "What's wrong?"

"I can't move... my legs and arms... they won't move!"

Two big hands scoop me up and throw me over their shoulder. The people drop, one by one, coughing up red spots and then stopping still like the ice. Mammamas hug their babies, until they drop too, and the gas keeps moving in through the air. I've breathed in some of it, but it doesn't make me cough.

"Brother, I'm scared." I cry till my cheeks are soaked.

"We're nearly at the ship."

"Are they gone, like Mamma?"

"Not yet."

"But they will?"

He puts me into the ship and drives it away from the shore. The mayor runs down the dock, falling to the ground as the gas gets her too.

"They'll all die eventually," he says.

I shake and shake, and sob and sob. The little girl will die... and all the mammamas, and their babies too.

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FAYE

Chapter 42: Ownership

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My feet depress into the sand, warm grains flow like running water. I'm a pebble sinking into foam. Grey and yellow flowers shoot tall through the dune.

"We'll meet the head councillor, Knell. He can help us," says Ellbray.

They lead me away from the teleporter. The mainland has nothing on Red Island. When I was rotting in the underground lab, this is what I thought Cetera looked like.

Ellbray stands like a beacon; chalk white, lit by a booming sun. I follow her into the forest, comforted by shade from the leafy canopy. The high and low chirps of flying animals set the tune to our journey. One glides overhead, big wings outstretched, scruffy pink head and moss green body to match the forest. It swoops into a tree and wraps its orange beak around a bunch of dangling blueberries. A group of furred mammals squeal, swinging between branches with their tails.

"How ridiculous. Their ears look like fans made of whiskers!"

"First time here?" says Ellbray.

I nod. "I haven't even seen pictures."

I skip to a pond of murky water. A neon blue creature with webbed feet hops around it.

"I want to pet its skin. Slimy." Its large black eyes flicker at me, a clear translucent film blinks overtop in slow motion.

"I wouldn't recommend it." Ellbray laughs. "That's a poison dart frog. Ruthlessly toxic."

"Maybe I'll be okay, since I'm not human."

“That little frog can poison almost anything.” Ellbray kneels and points to its spotted back.

“Animals evolved like that to warn predators of how dangerous they are.”

Ellbray’s fur looks like a silk cloud, I can’t see it warding off predators.

“You worked for G.R.A.Z.I.A., right?” I say, nudging her forearm. Her body untenses at my touch. A surge of her strength rumbles beneath my skin.

“For a time,” she answers.

Objects magnify and sharpen. A rattle snake activates my teeth and fingernails. I press my canines into my lip. Hide my hands. With a heavy breath I calm my stolen wolf-instinct. “Why did you do it?”

Ellbray looks around the forest. “I have a deaf sister, Lees. Father said ‘a wolf needs nothing to be strong, except her will’. He wasn’t wrong, but because of her perceived limitations, I was shipped off to work for G.R.A.Z.I.A. in her place. A show of peace between Kwewu and humans, but he’d been training me to spy on G.R.A.Z.I.A.”

The frog splats in the water and disappears under a set of loosely stacked pebbles. “You were never on their side?”

“Not at the start. But President Trudo was kind. He had a device engineered for Lees. It translated vibrations in the air into visual representations of sound. When father found out it was G.R.A.Z.I.A. technology, he took it away from her.” Ellbray skips a pebble in the pond. “The one thing that connected her to everyone else, but he couldn’t concede his pride for it. She grew into the same proud wolf as father and hated Trudo and Ren as she was fed father’s lies.”

The forest smells intensify, layering upon each other and combining. The unheard sounds of the city ring clear in my ears. “Does she wear the device now?”

“She can read lips but started wearing the device again to communicate with the Vivé army. Her rank was more important than father’s rules.”

“Sounds like quite the warrior.”

“Wait till you meet her.” Ellbray backs away. “Please keep this conversation to yourself.”

People talking about a future with me in it. Something about that brings me a warmth inside my chest.

We continue through the forest, the crunch of copper leaves punctuating every step. I let her overwhelming power diffuse into the cool air. Wolf senses are wild and claustrophobic, nothing like human ones. Ellbray finds a clearing through a thin raspberry bush. A sour, citric smell. I pull a raspberry off the tree and squish it in my hand. Red liquid drips into the creases on my palm. Its small indents make it look like a human heart. Up close, tiny hairs stick out its sides.

“Go on.” Ellbray smirks. “Eat it.”

I shove the squished berry into my mouth. My tongue curls. Eyes water and wrinkle. “Bitter!” I keep chewing. “But sweet, like flowers.”

“You’re a curious alien.”

I swallow it, cross my arms, and knit my brows.

“I didn’t mean to offend,” says Ellbray.

The grassy blankness before me disappears and the city materialises, pixel by pixel.

“Dragons Soil, the teleporting city,” Ellbray winks.

Every building crafted uniquely, coloured in pastels, whites, greens, and bright reds. Not cold metal stained with the G.R.A.Z.I.A. symbol. Surrounded by flax bushes, palm trees, vines, and orange-spotted lilies. All interconnected by a walkway made from uneven tree stumps and crushed

shells. The inhabitants don't stare at Ellbray or me. They walk past with no regard or offer us a smile. Some wear long, hand-sewn robes like royals in books, others wear baggy singlets and underwear-sized shorts. The ocean licks the shore between the hum of chatter and laughter.

We make our way to a building with a large balcony overlooking the city. Silk curtains blow out the balcony window and wave like sea kelp. The guards at the door stand out, the first silver I'd seen since arriving, full silver armour from head to toe. They let us through, and we climb a winding spiral staircase to a small, warm room at the top. Three people sit in large cane seats with red velvet overlays. The first to stand is wearing a golden robe with an owl stitched into the breast pocket.

"I'm so glad the teleport coordinates were correct, the gent who calculates them can drink my partner under the table." He shakes Ellbray's hand, then mine. "The G.R.A.Z.I.A. infiltrator and the alien weapon all here on my doorstep!" He claps three times fast. "I'm Knell."

"I know about the trade. We must make it now. Offer Faye to Kabel and allow Faye to destroy their army from within."

"You just missed Vice-President George. Spouting nonsense about our army going to North Kabel to save his children. I've tried to tell him so many times, suicide missions aren't really my thing," says Knell. "He wanted to make the same exchange, but Kabel's swallowed the West and probably isn't in the mood for making deals." Knell swoops up his large mug and swigs back a bubbly, dark yellow substance. "We understand you harbour a monstrous power. Roth's enemies would like to own you," says Knell staring into my eyes.

"I cannot be owned."

"I apologise. Poor choice of words. Lord Kabel wants to use you for her political games. And might I say, so does this Kwewu."

"And you?" I say.

“Red Island too, but at least we give you a choice. G.R.A.Z.I.A. didn’t. We’re simple people. We were born on Cetera and want the Capital back, our homeland. They stole it from us. The blood of the planet runs through our veins, not theirs.”

“We need to free the Kwewu trapped in North Cape first. That’s the deal, otherwise Faye leaves with me,” says Ellbray. “They’re being tortured, used as slaves.”

“And while that travesty keeps me up at night, we must think of our army and assure the lives of our people first.” Knell sips his drink. “My councillors have prepared a hotel for you. It must have been a long trip.”

“We are not tired. We must move to North Cape, now,” says Ellbray.

“That was not a question,” Knell says.

Knell looks human, sounds human, but the vibrations of his emotions are not at all human.

“Tell me about this choice I have,” I interrupt.

“First prove you’re the weapon,” says Knell.

“You want proof?”

“I’m certainly not going to be disturbing Lord Kabel based on the words of a wolf and a girl,” says Knell.

“What do you expect her to do, break into G.R.A.Z.I.A. HQ and get documentation?” says Ellbray.

Knell raises an eyebrow. “If that’s what it takes.”

“We don’t have time for this,” says Ellbray.

Knell looks at his watch and presses his earpiece. “Guards, our meeting has concluded. Please come and teleport our visitors elsewhere.”



"We've come all this way, why would we lie to you?" says Ellbray.

"Why would the wolf at Beth's side lie to me? A very interesting question. Wish I knew the answer. Yes, I did see you on that live update, pushing through crowds for her. Whatever Beth wants with Red Island, she can't have it. The Capital's taken enough from us. You're lucky you didn't get jailed upon entry. I don't see any permits on you."

"Why would I lie to you?" I say.

"Not a clue. Maybe Ellbray offered you a few credits. Who knows what arrangements you've made. But it's time for this charade to end so I can break out the wine."

The guards enter the room and congregate behind us. They beckon to their weapons and handcuffs. "Come with us the easy way or the hard way."

I think for a moment and stare at Ellbray's weapon's belt. "Pass me your searing knife."

Ellbray's eyes bolden.

"You plan to kill me now? What a day," says Knell.

"Here's your proof." I slide out the blade. Turn it on. It's blistering hot. Slice. I make a clean cut through my arm. It falls to the ground, bloodless. The room gasps. "It'll grow back. Regenerative powers."

The blade is hot enough to close the wound but the pain of breaking through bone is the worst I've ever felt. Through all the beatings and slow torture, through the isolation and the trash compactor, cutting through bone is much worse. I black out.

The disembodied voice returns.

*They want to trade you like an object, and you cut your arm off for them? What if it doesn't grow back?*

"It will."

*You don't need to prove anything to these filthy humans. Their eyes are green now, you could show them your real strength.*

"They're not humans. And I can decide that for myself, thank you."

*They're all the same to me. Just a little push. A little shove. That's all you need, child. Try it out. Find yourself a human, complete scum, and give them a little taste. There'll be some skulking around this place for sure.*

"Leave me alone."

*You'd better hope your arm grows back.*

I wake in a bed with Knell sitting next to me. Beige silk sheets caught in knots between my legs. An intravenous drip in my remaining arm. Days' worth of sweat built in my armpits. He crumples the fluid bag, looking for bubbles. Nutritional adjusters. Beth taught me about them: 'the drip enters the bloodstream and assesses cellular damage. It adjusts caloric intake, fluid, hormone levels, growth, blood pressure and the innate immune system to identify the fastest route to recovery. Prehistoric garbage if you ask me. My nanomachines prevent the need for this type of modulation.' She looked at me with those eyes, depths of colour beyond my own.

"I gave it a little kick." Knell's face shines. "Dragon's Blood."

He sees my eyes bulge from their sockets and quickly explains, "not the fire-breathing, flying reptile kind. A herb, made from flowers that grow here every few moons."

"Oh." I still have a lot to learn.

"It's what got us kicked from the Capital, you know."

"G.R.A.Z.I.A. didn't like the kick?"

“Oh, no, G.R.A.Z.I.A. loved the kick. It was the ultimatum we didn’t like. The directive that all citizens of the Floating City were to be injected with nanomachines or leave.”

“You didn’t want them?” Beth told me nanomachines were unable to bind to my system. Some part of me wishes I could have them, like everyone else.

“Why attach steel wings to a phoenix?”

“So, you left the Capital and happened upon a deserted, tropical island just waiting for you?”

“That’s the funny thing about the way G.R.A.Z.I.A. buries things. Subtle, but enormous. The whole of Cetera was a tropical wonderland, brimming with life like Red Island. When Kabel’s family arrived here, they mined all the ore and cut down all the trees to build their home. And their home turned to ice. Necessity. But G.R.A.Z.I.A. came here with all the oil, platinum, gold, and silver they could carry and proceeded to destroy the planet anyway. Greed. Their land turned to stone.”

“And how do you keep yours alive?”

“The planet works in cycles. Give and take. Cut a flower from its root and suck the stem dry, spread its pollen throughout the flowerbed in return. Life breeding life.”

“How do you give back Galacktite? There’s no way to exchange it.”

“We don’t.” Knell laughs. “You Westerners know so little. Red Island doesn’t need Galacktite power or Boonshields. Our sun provides all the energy we need while yours scorches your homes and melts your skin.”

The projection window next to me flashes with images of the beach, palm trees gesturing against the wind. “Just because you decorate the walls, doesn’t make this any less of a cage.”

Knell rubs his chin stubble. “You’re not my prisoner.”

“Then I can walk out that door?”

“The city teleports all over the island at random time intervals and locations. When you want to leave, you’ll have to time it right or end up in the middle of nowhere with no teleporters in sight.” Knell’s eyes glue to my absent arm. “Brave thing you did. I hope it grows back.”

“It will,” I answer.

“Those powers might be used for good. I have a friend with a spinal injury, maybe your tissue could restore the cells in his spine.”

“Why don’t they just use robotic legs like others do?”

“It’s a long story.” Knell fluffs my pillow and checks the stump where my arm was. “In any case, get some rest. We’ll await the growing of your arm and then go from there.”

“Where’s Ellbray?”

“Holed up in her hotel in protest. Not happy that we don’t want to send our entire army to the slaughter for the Kwewu at North Cape.” Knell flicks the IV. “But she must understand, we’ve waited hundreds of years to take our homeland back. There’s no point getting it if half our people die in someone else’s war.”

“Isn’t the war for life everyone’s war?”

Knell smiles. “Smart, but us leopards don’t tend to change their spots.”

For a man with an owl embroidered on his robe, he refers to himself as almost every other creature.

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**BETH**

**Chapter 43: Baited**

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I sit in Roth's chair, smelling the remains of his strong cologne and aged scotch. It's a shame the experiments made it out of the underground lab alive. I thought at least Ellbray would die. I don't need Nineteen anymore, I have my own baby. I run my hand along my belly, soothing my child. My peace is disturbed when Kubro and Saed enter the office.

"The mayor of West Cape sent a brief communication before we were no longer able to get in contact with any of our spies there. Kabel has entered the West, entered our soils. Vice-President George is missing and Vivé has been invaded, too," says Saed. "She's coming for us next."

"Nanomachine viruses," I say, knitting my fingers together. "She couldn't have overpowered us. Only disabled us." Not bad, Kabel. I look to Saed. "Smuggle in an infected. We'll cure the virus and destroy her from within the West."

"With respect, how can I get anyone past Lord Kabel's army?"

"Her entire army can't already be there. Make it happen."

"Bring the virus that destroyed the West here? This is madness. What if it spreads?" says Kubro.

"If it spreads, I'll have it cured and it won't matter. Will it, dog?"

"All this power has gone to your head. This is playing into Kabel's hand."

"No, Kubro, this isn't power, this is my extensive knowledge of nanomachines and bio-warfare. Not that you'd understand. Saed, get out and get me a sample."

Saed scurries out of the room.

"Discord is great and all, but remember, I never stay on the losing side," says Kubro.

"And you'd be wise to remember I made a promise to kill you one day. And I will," I say.

I spend sleepless nights waiting for Saed. That little idiot better bring me a sample or he'll be the next twin to die. My stomach looks bigger and grows tighter each day. You're going to be here soon, my daughter, and together we'll be unstoppable. The voice had been quiet lately. I'd worried my baby had died. But it sent me a message yesterday, an unforgettable one. *Your baby will breathe the air of Cetera soon, and as it does, Cetera becomes its property.*

Finally, Saed brings me the sample. I study it in complete isolation for days, wearing protective gear and ensuring no others enter the room. However, when I break for caffeine capsules, G.R.A.Z.I.A. grunts whisper that the virus has spread, and my sample somehow entered the city before it found me.

"Saed, how the hell did you get the sample? How many people have the virus?"

"He was a-already in the Capital, I don't know how he got here. Most of the army caught it. I-I'm sorry Beth. Kabel's army have found us," says Saed.

I look down from my tower. There she is, the demon beauty herself, standing at the head of her army with a small child at her side.

"Do they have The Mantle?"

"Not yet."

"Command them to put up their wall."

"But Beth, if they have got the virus, we'll be trapping them inside the wall. They'll die, slow, agonising deaths," says Saed.

"Or the virus hasn't spread there, and it becomes a haven from Kabel. Send the order."

Saed sends the signal.

“Go talk to her, Saed. Work out a deal. Go on. That’s your job isn’t it?”

“Beth, it’s Kabel... she won’t—”

“Go.”

Saed zips down the elevator. He exits the building, hunched over, and approaches Lord Kabel and the army lined up behind her. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers who’d sacrifice their throats for the woman. Saed edges closer, cautious and tentative. Their lips move. Saed drops to his knees. Lord Kabel, tall, in a purple snakeskin dress, flicks her hair to one side and stares down at him. He gestures to the blonde girl beside her. It looks like Vice-President George’s daughter, Lilly. What’s she doing here? Then she motions to her guard. Saed wraps his hands together, in a pleading position. He rocks back and forth. Crap. She pulls a katana from her guard’s holster. Her lips move, she looks up at me, then back at him. The blade slices clean through his neck. His head rolls onto the ground. His body falls with a short delay. Kabel steps back as his blood creeps towards her stilettos. She grabs his head by the hair and turns it towards me, looking up at my office. Her eyes lock onto mine.

“I’m not going next,” says Kubro.

“We’re fucked.”

Kabel hijacks my projection screen.

“Damn, she’s a sight for sore eyes, isn’t she?” Kubro drools over Kabel.

Kabel starts, “We’ve never met, ‘President’ Beth,” says Lord Kabel, “but I assure you I take no prisoners. The disloyal are of no use to me, hence the loss of your messenger’s head. I’m sure you’ll agree. Good soldiers are loyal from the moment they leave their mother’s womb to the moment they kill or be killed for you.” The communication cuts.

“If only she accepted pleading traitors.”

I flick a sharp look at Kubro.

He puts his hands up in the air. "Don't give me that look."

Lord Kabel and a small portion of her army enter the building.

"Since I'm going to die anyway, care to tell me how I survived the blast when Roth died instantly?"

I give Kubro a side-eye. "A fraction of the weapon's powers. Explosive cells that self-destruct, target biological matter and freeze the circulatory system from the inside."

"Ahh, that explains the building being intact. You're talking about that alien you kept in the basement?"

I grit my teeth. I can hear them. Climbing the tower, shooting the last of the guards. "We were all meant to die in that room. A suicide bombing. I've been thinking about it for awhile. Wondering how we survived." I look down to my stretched belly and wrap my hands around it gently. "She saved us."

The sound of bodies barrelling out the windows, off floating platforms, splattered on the silver below interrupts my thoughts. "I've... my baby... my baby won't get to live."

"Any chance she can save us again?"

"I don't know." I can feel her kicking against my skin. Bruising me from the inside, desperate to get out.

"Before we get our heads cut off by that beautiful lady out there, you have to tell me one thing." Kubro leans back in his chair. "Was it true? About the Kwewu and the radiation?"

I ruminate in silence for a bit. Kubro is as trustworthy as someone who tells you to 'just trust them'. The jig is up though, no point in keeping it secret now. "No." I close my fists. "It wasn't."



"I knew it!" He pumps his fist.

"The most infuriating part of it all is that those bastards were engineered to be infertile and yet somehow they spread like wildfire."

"This whole thing was your idea? Not Roth's?"

"Hmph." I throw back my head. "Do you think he was smart enough to plan all this?"

Kubro leaves his chair and stands so close I can see a coiled blonde hair slithering out of his shirt. "Why *are* we infertile, then?"

I crumple my lips. "The planet." I grab Kubro's arms and sink my nails into them. "The fucking planet wants us dead."

Kubro chuckles. "The planet?"

"Years and years of research, following on from my predecessors, looking into every possibility, and the only thing that makes sense is that it's something the planet's doing. Cetera wasn't a wasteland when we arrived here, but it sure as hell is now."

Kubro snaps to the door. "They're nearly here."

"Well, I guess this is it."

"Or is it?" says Kubro coyly.

"Don't toy with me. Do you have a plan?"

"The teleporter."

"You know I can't. Roth gave me the capsule."

"No. I gave you the capsule."

I smash my fists on his chest and a tear trickles down my face. "Please tell me—"

“Maybe I gave you the wrong capsule.”

“You knew all along and you wanted to have a chat first?”

“You’d never tell me what I wanted to know unless you thought you were going to die.” He smirks.

“Where, where would we teleport? Vivé’s full of Kwewu enemies, the West is Kabel’s, my lab is gone, Red Island would have a field day holding me ransom, The Mantle is stuck in their Boonshield—”

“Stop talking. Roth always had a backup plan for these situations. As his weapons specialist, I’m disappointed you didn’t know. There’s a safehouse deep underground, a teleporter with a code only his council members know.” Kubro smirks and walks over to the teleporter. He enters the code. “Last chance to roll the dice. You may never see your precious Floating City again.”

“There’s no turning back now. Whatever happens next isn’t part of my plan,” I say, stepping through the teleporter.

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FAYE

**Chapter 44: The Wolf & The Suit of Armour**

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We sprint through the forest, bashing against Red Island's thick palm trees and cutting our ankles on thorned bushes. A silver shield rushes us. Blue Dragon painted on the front. Alice shoves them against a tree trunk and wraps her hands around their throat. Uneven bark tears into his armour. His feet dangle above the sand.

"I've had enough," she says.

"Alice, stop!"

She clamps tighter. The soldier's oxygen levels dip. I can feel his lifeforce fading.

"Why? This one's just a pawn! They're all just pawns. But they have a choice." She pulls out her sword and pricks at their cheek, bursting through the skin and letting blood leak. Their legs crash and flail against the palm tree. They try to peel Alice away from their throat.

She'd come for me in the dead of night, broke me out of prison, and I had the gall to question her ethics. "Please?"

Alice shoves them once more, knocking them out cold and lets them drop to the ground. Still alive. We run to the East dock. Through the forest, trampling bushes, trees, and insects. The salt seas are still at night, reflecting dying stars. Red glowing lights spawn from the shadows of the palm trees. She throws me into the teleporter.

The teleportation experience is always strange. Time erodes and my body floats within it, in trillions of tiny pieces. Each disjointed part its own entity, with thoughts, feelings, and memories. And then, as we near the West shore, the other teleporter sucks you into its portal. Like all the air in your lungs being removed in a vacuum. It suctions me into one whole existence again, glues me

together like a broken vase. I feel colourless and immovable for a few seconds, as my consciousness catches up to my body. The machine zaps me twice with electrical currents, stimulating my brain. Now I can hear water clapping against rocks, the clicks of Alice's armour, and the sound of my own breaths.

My brain function comes back, and I remember how we got here. I'd been stuck in Red Island, Ellbray locked away by Knell, the hopes of the Kwewu slaves on my shoulders. After leaving her, I didn't think she'd come for me. But, as I was nodding off, the disembodied voice beginning to scratch its way into my skull, Alice crashed through the window projection I'd set on 'starry sky – comet edition', ripped me out of bed and pushed me out the Alice-shaped hole in the wall. We tumbled down a steep bank and into the arms of the patrol. Knell must've set off an alarm when he heard all the commotion, but Alice was laser-focussed and didn't flinch until that last guard... what was it about him?

"What happened back there?" I say.

Alice is crushing seashells into shards and kicking pebbles into the ocean. If I focus so hard my veins almost coil together beneath my skin, I swear I can feel her fast heart rate, pounding through that golden chest plate. I know there's something beneath it.

"Every time we try to beat this... this system. Something's there to get in our way. And they always claim it's just their job or they have to. I'm tired of it."

"I think my worst fear is that the best thing I'll ever do before I leave this world is nothing. No good, no bad. Just... nothing. I follow people around, pretending I'm part of something."

"What was it Beth used to say about followers?" she kicks a rock so furiously, it dents her boot.

"The followers are just as much the leaders." I take a long breath. "Though, I think she meant that as a compliment to herself."

Alice crumbles on the sand. Waving her gauntlets in front of her visor. Spreading the gloved fingers out, staring into them for a long time. "We're part of this." She points out to the rippling waves. "The planet."

"You spent a lot of time with Beth, didn't you?" I say.

"I grew up with her."

"Just like me," I say.

"We have a lot in common," she says. "Someone dear to me lived in East Cape. I still don't know if they died in the attack or were lucky enough to be elsewhere. If I told that to an ex-G.R.A.Z.I.A. guard, they'd take no blame. It was Roth all along. He's the corrupt one."

"Why didn't you say anything?" I focus harder, but her emotions feel further away than they ever were. "That's why you asked Diz about it."

Alice punches the sand, impressing her gauntlet in as deep as her elbow. "It was stupid." She wriggles her arm free and gets back on her feet. "I was taking it out on that guard back there."

I walk over to her slowly with a gentle smile and brush her arm. "Well, I forgive you."

Her neck twists. I can tell her body's tense. Her visor aimed for the teleporter. She shoves me behind her. My bodyguard.

"You're not taking Faye again," says Alice. "You'll have to go through me this time."

I peek out from behind Alice, not sensing any danger from the other body that's appeared.

Ellbray raises her arms. "That's not why I'm here."

"If you've escaped, it won't be long before Red Island guards come through that teleporter and then we're all screwed," says Alice.

“That’s why I came, Faye, I owe you. Red Island was a long shot, I never should’ve let them take you, not to win my battle. You can hide in the underground safehouse Roth built. Access it from this teleporter with a special code. I’ll come and get you when the world is a little kinder.”

I walk over to Ellbray and take her large paw into my hand. “You don’t know me, but you’ve protected me so many times now. You have a good heart. Thank you.”

Ellbray and Alice nod at each other in stoic silence. Ellbray leaves us and we enter the special code. It teleports us to a dark place, a place that looks like an ancient railway station. A hot, sticky, humid hall that reminds me of the lab.

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ELLBRAY

Chapter 45: Brutal Truth

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The tiny whiskers inside my twitching ears flutter. Pinpointing how far I am from North Cape by listening to the sounds of the Capital against the cries of the Kwewu slaves. They'd probably been crying for days in ultrasonic waves. Vibrations of despair. My eyes fill with colour. I'm close.

Particles of smell drift along the desert winds and stick to my wet nose. Dirt, sweat, blood, tears. The smells of suffering. Or hard work, as President Roth always phrased it. But he's dead now, and I'll never know if he killed my son.

The hum of humans; crashing, crushing, explosions, in rhythm with their heartbeats. Forty, maybe fifty, still surrounding North Cape, keeping the Kwewu inside a prison even though G.R.A.Z.I.A. has long since fallen. But I can't go there yet, not alone. I need reinforcements.

I use the North Cape teleporter and find myself outside of Vivé. Eerily quiet. Missing the sounds of people and war. I climb into the sewers where Lees told me the Rebels have been building safe houses for years. I'd never believed it as a kid, but Lees knew all about them. About this Kwewu who was part Red Islander and part android. Who nobody accepted, not humans, not androids, and especially not us. It buried itself in the defunct sewers, building shelters and gathering resources. It was originally programmed as a super soldier to commit acts of war against the Kwewu and from that code, it knew a war was coming. Some Kwewu saw this too and joined it. I thought it was a tale told to keep us out of the sewers.

Diz finds me within minutes of entering the dank tunnels.

"Good sunshine to you. Are you in need of shelter?" says Diz. She pauses like a computer ticking over. She scans me from my ears to my toes. "The commander's sister, Ellbray, an ex-member of G.R.A.Z.I.A. This is a great asset to our calculations."

"What is the current status of Vivé?" I say.

"The Kwewu are down here, but President Beth sent G.R.A.Z.I.A. elite soldiers to clear Vivé of Kwewu. They're up in the manse. There are approximately fifteen unaccounted for soldiers roaming the city, but the rest have taken the manse in George's absence. His location is unknown. I have been able to dismantle the sticky bombs, but the holes ripped in the Boonshield remain."

"Damnit. I thought we'd scared them out of the manse." I clench my fists. "Rye is still in there."

"Rye." Diz's brain ticks over. "Ahh yes, citizen 14566, a child."

"A friend's son. Will the Rebels help me take the manse back? Will they fight with us to free the Kwewu of North Cape?"

"This is why I formulated the Rebels. But we do not kill and have few weapons. I am skilled enough with my katana to not kill with it, but many others aren't so dexterous."

"You won't kill anyone?"

"We are the AVR. Anti-Lethal Violence Rebellion."

"Are you sure you won't change your views? The Kwewu at North Cape have been beaten and tortured. Many have been killed. I see no other way to help them."

"We will not. Lethal violence should not be used to correct lethal violence. This is logical."

"Hmmm." I put my arm on Diz's shoulder. "Noble. The manse has weapons, many non-lethal. The kind G.R.A.Z.I.A. always leave in storage. Paralyzers, electrical disrupters, brain destimulators. Are these acceptable?"

"Calculating chance of lethality for all weapons," Diz pauses for a second. "4.2% average lethality rate." She smiles awkwardly. "I will ask the others to vote."



Diz leaves me there for the longest five minutes of my life.

“They do agree.”

“Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll take as many Rebels as we can to the secret entry to the manse. Don’t ask how I know about it.” Trudo, thank the God Wolf you lived in the manse all those memorable years. “We will knock out any guards on the way to the storage room. The manse is enormous and full of other weapons, meaning it’s unlikely they are guarding the non-lethal ones. I’m hoping the soldiers will be spread out. Once we have the weapons, we go and round up the soldiers. We ask them to fight with us or be imprisoned in the mansion jail.”

“This is an acceptable plot.”

The secret entry is still open, undoubtedly from the Vice-President’s escape. We sneak through, Diz, the Rebels, and I. The first group of guards hover over the entry. They accept our terms with no qualms. I lead everyone to the storage unit. The guards there put up a brief fight but give in as we strip them of their weapons. The unit contains piles of non-lethal weapons. I take a paralysis gun. Diz struggles with the choice.

“The brain destimulator is only a 2% rate of death but is 4% more emotionally demoralising than the paralysis gun, but the paralysis gun has a higher rate of death. The electrical disrupter is much slower and risks my own death but has the lowest chance of death. But if I die, then the Rebels will be temporarily displaced with no leader. I could use my katana, but the perception of it being a deadly weapon usually makes the assailant more aggressive.”

“Take the disrupter,” says one of the Rebels. “It suits you best.”

We split into four groups. Diz and I lead one each, and two other groups are made up by only Rebels. We cover each corner of the large manse, pushing the relenting guards into the foyer. We regroup and send Rebels in to sweep up the unconscious soldiers and haul them into the prison.

Diz and I find our way to the foyer, where the non-resistant G.R.A.Z.I.A. soldiers wait, on their knees, quiet and sombre.

“You have chosen to accept our request. Now you will help free those that you have caused great pain. My gratitude reaches above all the moons in the sky,” says Diz.

One soldier stands. I aim my weapon at him. He talks. “My daughter was born blind. G.R.A.Z.I.A. gave her the sight I couldn’t afford, in exchange for my loyalty. I caused all this suffering for my own selfish wants, but now I am free, and I wish to set the Kwewu free too.”

Another stands. She hunches her back and stares at the silent crowd. “G.R.A.Z.I.A. rescued me from Lord Kabel and told me the only way I could repay them was to kill for them. And I did it. Without question.”

“Rye!” I spot him behind her and sprint to him. He has a small cut on his cheek but is otherwise unharmed. “Thank Chrysos you’re okay.” I muss his hair.

“She helped me!”

“I wasn’t going to let them hurt a child. I was saved once, and it was about time I returned the favour.”

I smile at the human. “Thank you.”

Another in the crowd speaks out. “They had my best friend; they were going to execute her. I let G.R.A.Z.I.A. bloody my hands so she’d live. I helped imprison and murder hundreds of Kwewu to save one life.”

“I have seen the many ways that G.R.A.Z.I.A. keeps its soldiers in line, but I will not force you,” says Diz. “The others that have not sided with us will remain in prison, but once the war is won and the Kwewu are free, so too will they be. It is not my want to force you into battle, but to show you a way to find peace within your chest cavity.”

As Diz's speech ends, everyone gets to their feet and throws their hands in the air. It's what we were missing: we needed a kind leader, a person of pure intent.

A guard flies into the foyer. Slides along the ground, non-lethal weapons aimed at his head. He jumps on top of Diz and pulls out a laser blade aimed to plunge into Diz's throat. I dive onto him and extend my claw into his carotid artery. As I release, his blood empties onto the marble floor.

Diz stares at me for a long, scrutinising moment. "One life is not worth the sacrifice of another."

I help Diz off the ground. "I only know one way to save lives." I stare at the drained body lying between the other soldiers. "Your life seemed important."

Diz pushes my paws away and analyses the body. "There is no life left inside his shell," she says greyly. "You destroy existence with little concern for its permanence." Diz looks to her followers, scanning the horror on their faces. "There is nothing more in this world than life."

The members of the AVR look at me the same way they look at Roth's soldiers. With trembling hands and recoiled bodies.

"I cannot endorse such a conclusion," says Diz.

"Don't worry, I get it." I hide my blood-stained claws. "I'll round up the soldiers at the lab. And then you won't see me again."

Diz blinks robotically, trying to process my understanding as I walk away. Eyes following me carefully with each step.

I find the lab, door wide open, with a small number of soldiers inside. I activate my gun. The two guards twinge and fall flat on the ground below. Wide-eyed. Full of terror.

"Stay here," I say, kicking one of them to the side.

I find each guard and take them down. Must be injected with second rate nanomachines, nothing like what Beth gave me. At the back of the lab, the sound of equipment lures me to a locked door. I kick it in to find an older gentleman glued to his computer and wearing a white coat. He acknowledges me.

"I presume the others are dead if you've been able to reach me." He wobbles to his feet and slides across the floor with one leg shorter than the other.

"Dr Henley." I focus in closer. "You made it out of the city."

"That little bitch I saved for you." He wraps his crinkled hands around my wrists and digs in. "She blackmailed me. Beth said she'd tell Roth I killed Trudo and Ren. She said if I didn't do what she wanted, she'd tell him, and he'd torture my family and kill me. But, instead, she murders Roth and then comes for me! Not even with her own hands, she sends some lowly soldiers to beat me to death. But I convinced them to come here in safety and escape her. I told them she will lead the Capital to ruin. And the stupid bitch did!"

I blink. Slow. Cogs tick and clink into place. My temperature doubles. Threads of white fur stand away from my body. My claws wrap around his fleshy wrists and dig holes. Canines extend from my open, dry mouth.

"Say it again." My eyes narrow. "Who did you kill?"

Henley struggles to tear his arms away from my grip. "Pull away and you'll lose your arms." I move my teeth closer to the vein rippling through his tired neck. "Say it again, old man."

"Nothing. No-one. Beth lied! I didn't kill anybody. I'm a doctor, I save people. You have to believe me." His breaths draw closer and closer together.

"It's one thing to die by a wolf, but being tortured by one, that is no way to die." I pull him in close enough to feel my heart race. "Who did you murder in cold blood? Whose lives did you take from us?"

"I-I-I...I killed Trudo. And Ren."

"There." I shove five claws into his side shattering three ribs into his lungs. His breaths become shallower and quicker. "How good does it feel?" I twist the claws. "To release your guilt?"

He splutters. Droplets of his blood land on my fur, like bits of copper on steel. He lets go of me and his knees rattle. I hold him upright by his wound to keep him standing.

"Why?" The nanomachines will keep you alive long enough to tell me.

Two sharp breaths. "It." Breath. "Was an." Breath. "Accident."

"Nothing at G.R.A.Z.I.A. is accidental!" I shove my other claw into his kidney. He squints. Too out of breath to scream. I shove my claws deeper into Henley's shivering body. "Come on, you only have a few more words left to speak in this world, let's make them the truth."

"I..." His lip trembles. "Mixed up the nanomachines..." Gasp. "I gave Trudo Ren's, and Ren's to Trudo." Blood pools around my boots. "Th-the body rejected it... attacked itself... was too late to save them.... before I-I realised..."

The heat dies. The cogs stop turning. My heart stabilises. The rage cools. An accident. Somehow, nothing would have satisfied me. Murder or otherwise. Roth or Henley. And to find out the truth, I only had to lose everyone I've ever loved.

"Ren was my son. Isn't it obvious?"

I slit his throat.

“It is true.” My dilated eyes catch Diz in the doorway. She stands still on her own. “You don’t only kill in exchange for life,” she says.

I can still feel Henley’s ending life at my hands. The mush of his insides against my claws.

“Revenge,” I say.

“Did it repair you?”

My muscles pulsate. Still excited. “No.” I shake my head.

“If you leave here now, you will not be imprisoned by the AVR. Let it be your final warning.”

Henley’s eyes have rolled back into his head. His mouth hangs open. The stench of an ended life hits my nose. Where do I go? There’s no place for me on Cetera.

“And Ellbray, if there was one piece of data I could transfer to you, it would be to seek back the lives you’ve taken.”

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LILLY

**Chapter 46: Correct Answers**

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I run out of tears, but I can't forget the poor girl on the ground at West Cape, and all the people around her. Lying there on the stone, not moving, their eyes empty like doll's eyes. My skin turns cold.

"The G.R.A.Z.I.A. lobby," says Kabel with her arms in the air, "the centre of the Capital. All mine."

"Lord Kabel," says Khalid, "you have everything you want." He bows to her as if she's his queen.

I look up through the glass floors of the building. I've been here before, but last time I came, it wasn't so quiet.

"Not yet, that woman Beth must be at the top of this tower. And I intend to take her knowledge and her life." She shows her white teeth. "But I have some business to take care of first." Her heels clomp as she gets close to Khalid.

"Will I be part of your army now?"

Goosebumps raise hairs along my arms. Khalid tricked me to be a soldier for this evil woman.

"Actually, my guards found something very interesting when they searched the Capital."

Khalid shuffles in his spot, looks at me, and turns back to her. "Oh? My Lord."

She smiles and stares at me. "Dry your face."

I wish I could think of bunnies and frogs and the birds on Red Island, but instead I see twisted faces, covered in red. I see Verne falling to the ground by the sub, Khalid killed him. I know

now. I will never see his kind face again. Never feel his warm arms wrapped around me. I rub my eyes and nose, leaving the tears on my sleeve.

“I’ve thought about your request.” Lord Kabel goes behind the reception desk and flicks off all the G.R.A.Z.I.A. signs. “I already have many soldiers in my army. Many great soldiers.”

“I will be greater.”

“Will you? A boy who’s never fought or trained? You speak as if you know war, but you know nothing.”

“If not a soldier then, whatever it is you want me to do, I will do it for you, my Lord.”

“You’ll do anything? What if all I want you to do is suffer?”

Khalid rises from his bow and looks confused.

The two front doors bigger than the Manse’s fly open.

“Dad!”

I try to run to him, but a guard snatches me back, while another kicks Dad so he falls into the room.

“The family reunited!” Kabel claps her hands together. Her long, sharp nails look like wolf claws. “Isn’t this special?”

“You fool...what have you done?” Khalid glares at Dad.

“Found him trying to escape the Capital to Red Island,” says Kabel, “as if my grip doesn’t reach there.”

I wriggle and kick the guard’s shins. He grunts and holds me tighter.



Kabel sways over to me. "Lilly, answer this question right and you might save your family," she smooths a strand of hair behind my ear with one cold finger. "Tell me child, who should I kill? Your brother or your father?"

"Neither!" I jerk my head away.

"Tsst, wrong answer." Kabel winks at her guards. One grabs Khalid and holds him tight like me.

"Please, lady, don't hurt them." I beg.

She snaps to me with scary, dark eyes. "That's Lord Kabel to you, child."

"I'm so sorry, Khalid, this is all my fault." Dad's voice wobbles. "Lilly...I'm sorry you got caught up in this, my dear. You mean the world to me and whatever happens today, you have to keep on being strong, promise?"

"I promise, Dad," I say.

"George, what happened?" Khalid says. His eyes are big ovals.

"I got caught, son." They kick Dad in his back. "I guess you were right. I'm no good at war."

"Please, Kabel, have mercy on George. He's no threat to you," says Khalid.

"No threat to me?" Kabel grins and clutches her hip. "The Vice-President of G.R.A.Z.I.A. isn't a threat to me, you say?"

"G.R.A.Z.I.A. died with Roth, you have their Capital, their headquarters," Khalid stares at Dad and hisses under his breath, "Damn it, you should have left her and saved yourself."

"I came for you both," Dad looks like he's in pain. "Khalid, you're my true son."

"What are you on about old man?" says Khalid.

"You were born from Elmyrah's womb. She died giving birth to you. I," Dad chokes. "I couldn't bear to let her go. Son, I took the last of your mother's DNA..."

A strange look passes over Khalid's face.

"Classy," Kabel smirks. "You cloned your lover to engineer your daughter. And people think I'm messed up."

I'm a...clone?

"Lilly doesn't have long to live like you, Khalid. You've got a few hundred years. I just wanted her..." Dad looks at me, "I wanted you to have the best possible life before you expire."

Dad's eyes look sadder than when Mamma died. I want to reach out and wipe away his sadness and hug him till he's warm. "I want to live long like Khalid. Dad...I don't want to be Mamma's clone." I don't wanna be a clone...I wanna be normal!

"What a touching story," Kabel signals to the guard, "but I don't have time for this."

The first guard pulls out a huge sword. The other guard kicks Dad again. This time he falls to his knees.

"You don't happen to know how this woman of yours birthed an actual child?" says Kabel.

Dad shakes his head. His whole body is shaking too.

"A shame," says Kabel.

"I'm sorry," says Dad. "I love you both so much."

"Dad!"

The sword goes through Dad's neck. I try to curl up like a snail, but the guard holds me straight. Red from Dad's body creeps along the marble toward my feet.

I look up at Khalid. His face is hard. Wet streaking down his cheeks. Kabel walks up to Khalid and pulls a knife from her dress.

"I'm sorry, Lilly," Khalid cries, "I'm so sorry."

I can't close my eyes. It doesn't seem real when the knife goes in. She drags down and his belly opens up like a busted soft toy. I watch my brother's red stuffing spill onto her dress. Suddenly, I remember how to close my eyes. I squeeze them shut, feeling a warm trickle run down between my legs. I open my eyes as my brother's head hits the steps.

Kabel whistles. Two guards grab him by the ankles and drag him past Dad. I don't know who the blood belongs to anymore.

"By the way, 'both' was the correct answer." Kabel looks to her group of soldiers. "Let this be your warning. I have little use for traitors. A man who betrays his city and family is not a man I'd have at my side." She turns to me and pinches my wet chin. "If you stay loyal to me, you'll live. Maybe long enough to become a woman."

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**SKAR**

**Chapter 47: Fight for Life**

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A stomach eating itself. A ringing in my ears. Sun baking my fur. Holes in my arms. Bleeding out energy. Eyes sink into my brain.

“Time’s up.”

I wince and turn away from the noise. Is that... sound?

The guard rips me out of the silent chamber and kicks me near a medic. The medic injects me with four or maybe five things. I can’t feel the needles. In minutes, the gurgle in my stomach ends, my sunburn stops aching and my blood stays inside my body. Pain absorbs pain and then the pain is no more.

“Back to work.” The guard points to the mine.

I told them, I can’t.

I drag my body to the mine, knowing that another savage beating and probably my last visit to the chamber would be next. I can’t go on like this. Fox stops me before I grab the drill-pick.

“Remember what I told you.” He raises his tone to a high frequency the guards can’t hear.

“They can’t see the Galacktite. We’ve all been mining empty rocks for weeks. They won’t know.”

“Do you hear it too? The screams?”

Luria’s voice interjects. “We all hear it. Verd says it’s the planet crying in pain. Begging for us to stop. He says Chrysos was the first one who could speak to it. He made a pact with the planet so we could live. And now we’re using its blood for vanity.”

“Ignore her,” says Fox. “It’s gas releasing from the empty ore veins. Keep up the ruse for the humans. Help is coming. Hold on a bit longer.”

"My brother. Can they save my brother?"

"The planet can," says Verd. "If you respect it, boy. The planet will make sure we all live."

"It's not the planet. It's us. The only people we can trust to save us is ourselves," says Fox.

The guards thump into the mine and order us outside with an echoed whistle. Their caustic human smell is volcanic against my delicate nose hair. Unwashed skin held captive by layers of platinum armour. A warning that shoots from scent to stomach, scrunching the organ into ligature.

I emerge to a mesh ball of wires hanging in the sky. Each wrinkled dimple on its surface amplifies our orchestrated yowls. I tilt my head toward it. My pupils swallow the moonlight. The landscape recolours, tints of grey, white, and black. Rugged contours solidify into precise shadows.

The watcher taps his gun in loud, shrill clicks, rattling my frail ear bones like a rusted spring.

"Where are the other guards?" the watcher demands.

"They're cowards." The squelch of a wolf-tongue. Hot, carnivore breath.

"The hell you say, mongrel?" The watcher stalks close to Fox and cracks his shins with a laser whip. He collapses onto his knees. The snap of his muscle tissue curls my lip. My tail petrifies upright and fur stands like spikes.

"Your comrades are afraid of Lord Kabel. They've left the wall," says Fox. His normal scent dips, replaced with an onion, acidic smell. Fear.

"And how does a slave like you know about Lord Kabel?" The watcher bends down to Fox's eye level and holds the whip ready.

"We heard them talking before they left," I interrupt. "They said G.R.A.Z.I.A. is dead, that the Capital is hers." My mouth is so dry it'd crack with another word. The watcher and his red-hot whip, his head-caving gun, and his skull-cracking fists won't resist another clash with my body.

“Just as you come out of solitary confinement,” says the watcher. “The mutt is freed and then suddenly my soldiers have run off, tails between their legs.” The watcher kicks up dust as he staggers toward me. He grips the nape of my neck with two fingers. I crash into the dirt. The blade buzzes deep within my ears. Its heat emanates. He holds me there, keeping my sight on the sand. The others shuffle in their places. I hear Fox’s ankles tremble, but he gets to his feet.

The blade rises. I squeeze my eyes shut. My life for Fox’s; the price of a bark. A voice I should’ve found when they took Luc from me.

The watcher slashes down.

A soul-shattering snap. Layers of tissue exposed. Third degree burns. A molten wound. But it’s not my head that’s been removed from my body. I turn around to a pool of blood with my tail floating atop it. My tail...with its spine encased. Laid out before me. Detached from my body. A nub where it was soldered shut. I scream into the skies with human vocal cords. Howl as I pick up the bloodied tail. The watcher knocks it back into the dirt and stands on it, flattening the bones.

“Get back to camp, dog.”

I drag myself back, jolts of pain staple my remaining spine. Ignoring eye contact from others, I step straight into Meri’s tent. Her eyes widen when she sees my missing tail.

“Oh, Skar! What happened?” she pulls me close.

I wince and push her away, hiding my severed spine. “Wolves are stirring, sure to attack the guards soon. When they do, you have to promise me something.”

“Anything.” Her eyes twinkle.

“As soon as they do, we slip out of here to find Luc.”

“And leave the others here to fight without us?”

“Luc’s more important.”

Meri nods. “I’ll go with you.”

I try to exit her tent, but my wound cracks, sending agonising zaps up my back. She grabs my hand. “He’s still alive. I can feel it.”

I squeeze her hand, using all my willpower to avoid collapse. “I know he is.”

I stagger out of the tent, blurry eyed. A glowing rock a few meters away draws me close. It looks like it’s sprung up from the ground, I’m sure it wasn’t there before. As I edge close, semi-conscious from the agony, I realise it’s Galacktite, shimmering like colourful constellations. It makes a deep, miserable, whistling noise. The Galacktite has been gone for weeks, but this piece sits here, boldly, as if it doesn’t know that. I kneel and am hit with an excruciating jab deep within my spine. I fall face first into the dirt and grasp at its soft, marble surface to steady myself.

“I need you to do something for me first,” a voice echoes from within the rock. “Before you find your brother.”

My entire body shivers and I leap away from it. My vision obstructed by ink blots. “Who’s there?” I yelp.

The rock pulses with a dark red sheen. “Galacktite washes through the winding caverns underneath my lands and seas, gifting vitality everywhere it goes. It told me you were here, being forced by the humans to drain away my lifeblood.”

I forget the pain in my tail. My body pulsates with adrenaline. Maybe the watcher did kill me, and this is my dying brain firing off its last chemicals.

“Chrysos was the last voice that echoed in my chambers. Maybe you are his descendent, or maybe you are gifted. Regardless, it is nice to be heard after all these years.” The rock glows. “The

Kwewu were so far from nature, their ears forgot my tongue, but now you are all near my lifeblood, you listen once again.”

“Where are you?” I say, paws drenched in sweat. “Is your voice coming from inside this rock?”

“I am everything. The salt in the sea. The pressure in a volcano. The pH of the soil. I am the planet, Skar, and the planet needs you, or it will die soon along with all the life it carries.”



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**FAYE**

**Chapter 48: Identity**

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The tunnels smell of rotten water and are lit with weak, dark bulbs. A reminder of the airless cell I spent my life in. Wondering if I'd ever meet the bodies that filled my senses each day. The thrums of human emotion cased inside their skin, blood, and bone. I prayed that those electric currents would run through my veins one day. That the woman I chose as my mother would hold me in her arms so I could feel her arteries pump through her flesh. Echoed footsteps break my wandering thoughts.

"Hello?" I shout. A dark figure slams my head into the concrete. Blood bursts through my forehead. My brain blanks but my circulatory system rushes like waves crashing toward my wound.

He launches at Alice. She grabs the neck of her dagger, but he slides down to trip her. "Predictable." She side-steps. He crashes into the wall. "Been a while, Kubro."

He recovers quickly and flips toward her. Crystal dagger hot in hand, she swipes. He whips back and cocks his plasma gun. Two shots ricochet off Alice's armour. Orange light bounces, frays, and then forms a liquid gel where it lands. I can see Kubro's DNA in the bullets, the blood that keeps him alive separated into shards to kill others. She kicks his wrist, knocking the gun from him, and empties the plasma cartridge.

He smirks. A wicked, dark grin. "This is going to be fun." He pulls out a plastic object and clicks it on. "Hot enough to melt that armour, I'd bet." Kubro stares at the heated blade and licks his lips.

His body is fragmented, spots of heat with temperature deadzones. The same as his emotions.

Alice lunges and shoves her crystal blade into his arm. He doesn't shriek or move, just as I expect. She drags the dagger down, widening the wound. It sparks, exposing metal and wire. "I knew no human could fight me toe to toe." Alice smirks.

"Oh, honey, we're not fighting toe to toe." He chuckles, dropping the hot blade on Alice's left arm. It cuts through the joint and the arm piece slides off, revealing her pale, white skin.

Alice jumps back, leaving the dagger in Kubro. I hear tiny ticks as the nanomachines flock to his wound.

He yanks it out and slides it into his weapons belt. "I love to keep souvenirs." He pins her to the concrete wall behind, cutting off the armour on the other arm. Unclasping her helmet, he slides his fingers between the armour and presses hard on her neck. "Feel that? Your arms, tingling, numb. Great party trick. Stops you grabbing that other knife." His laser nips her jugular. "And dodging when I slice you open."

Alice is suffering. I don't recognise this feeling. Yearning. Boiling fingertips. My body projecting out of itself without permission. Bile in my throat. I'm behind him. Touching his back. His strength runs through my muscles, stimulating my adrenaline, thickening my skin. Wells of euphoria build inside the canals of my brain. My pores crack open like steaming rifts in the planet, making room for my concrete bones to expand.

"Stop," a voice echoes. "She'll match you. The perfect weapon."

"Beth?" I clamp my hand around Kubro's forearm. "Turn off the laser." Beth's voice reminds me of my bounty, her demolished lab, and the Kwewu she enslaved. The closest person I have to a mother and her only redeeming quality is the love she has for her real child.

"You've changed." Beth steps into the light. Her face distorts with unnatural shadow.  
"Kubro, meet Subject Nineteen."

"Little busy here," says Kubro.

I look at Beth's large, stretched stomach. The life inside glows a pale purple and never sits still in its sac of fluid.

Alice whips her searing knife from her boot and thrusts it into Kubro's ankle. He looks at his wound and sighs.

I glide over to Beth and wrench her arm behind her back. "I could kill her." I was an experiment to her, nothing more.

Kubro elbows Alice in the neck, crushing her windpipe. He shoves the searing knife into her armoured torso. Blood sprays out the hole.

"Kill her, Faye!" Alice yells, trying to pry Kubro's hand off the blade hilt.

"Kill Beth, kill Alice." Kubro shouts. "This blade can go deeper."

"Please," Beth begs. "My baby must live."

I loosen my grip. Beth falls to the ground. Still within killing distance.

"Don't kill my baby." She clutches her stomach. "This isn't like you."

"You tried to kill us all in the lab." I stride forward. My shadow covers her entirely.

"That was Ribbon. You have to believe me." She shuffles forward and cups my hand. "I'd never do that to you."

"Bullshit!" Alice yells and turns to Beth. "Your emotional shield doesn't work on me."

"Stop struggling," spits Kubro.

"I'm lying? Have you ever seen Alice without her armour? Or should I say, Subject Sixteen."

I've never seen Alice's face.

“Kubro, take off the helmet!” Beth screams.

He rips it off and pulls the knife out. Alice screws up her eyes. Her face, it’s exactly like—  
Kubro unclicks the legs of her golden suit. I gape. Her legs, like mine; her skin, like mine...

“See.” Beth’s twisted mouth forms a crescent moon.

Goosebumps run up my arms. Alight with pricked hairs. “You’re—”

“You.” There’s no metal to distort Alice’s voice. Each syllable and intonation identical to mine. Rattled breaths. Her hands temporarily seal her wound. “A clone,” Alice states.

I stare into a mirror. That’s why you keep things from me. You feel everything I feel.

“What am I? Another clone? Nobody?”

“No. I’m Alice. And you’re Faye.” Alice blinks slowly and stares into the depths of my eyes.  
Her face scrunches. She presses harder on her wound.

Beth interjects, “I set Alice free years before you.” She locks eyes with me, then flips to Alice, whose expression is blank as slate. Beth clears her throat. “And, Faye, you’re—”

“It’s all in the name.” Kubro laughs. “Subject Nineteen.”

I’m the nineteenth clone. “The original, where’s the original?”

“Off in space, where she escaped to. This worthless planet long forgotten.” Kubro slaps his thighs.

“The alien outsmarted us.” Beth shakes her head. “We made nineteen clones with its DNA. Faye, you’re the most precise clone. And Alice, the strongest.”

“It makes no difference,” Alice replies, monotone.

“Why can’t I sense you, Alice?”

"I'm masking my emotions, like Beth. You just need practise."

"You're my creations. Ribbon tried to kill you and destroy my legacy. Remember the happy years we spent together?" She buries her face in her hands, muffling her voice. "Please Faye, I'm begging you, if only for my baby, let me go."

Alice is grim. Kubro's itching to kill. Beth's heart clatters against its cage. If I cut her down, the life within her body will die too. And I can tell, it wants to get out. It wants to live.

"Go."

"No!" Alice yells.

Kubro shunts Alice aside, snatches her knife, and flips it in the air. "Thanks for the blade."

Beth takes one last look at me. Her eyes drill into my every bump and curve, eyeing my stringy, knotted hair. She frowns with disappointment in herself, not upset at the lost connection with a living being, but in the indignity of a failed experiment.

Kubro waves. "We'll finish this later, darlin'."

They disappear into the lightless distance.

I sprint over to Alice and touch her skin. I feel a burst of power and pick her up in my arms.

"A mistake." She whimpers. "You made a mistake." She passes out.

I fall to the ground and clutch my pounding head. My strength sapped away.

*Do It*

*Kill them*

*Kill them*

*Kill Them*

*kILL ThEM*

*ALLL*

*NOW*

*Blow them up*

*Destroy them Kill Kill Kill KILL KILL KILL KILL*

The disembodied voice screams in my brain.

*They All Must Die.*

*Take the Humans Down.*

*Kill every last one.*

*Explode.*

*Show them your power.*

*Let them suffer like you did.*

*Kill. Kill. Kill.*

*Especially that halfling baby inside that woman. That needs to die first.*

*They lied.*

*You're nothing.*

*But a clone.*

*Of me.*

*But I was sent to clear the planet.*

*For them.*

*Now. Do the job I was sent to do. Clear it. What have you got left? Only me. I'm the real one.*

*KILL THEM.*

"Can you hear me?"

"Alice? Is that you?"

"Suppress the voice. You can do it."

"How are you doing this?"

"I'm not sure."

"You hear the voice too?"

"All the time."

"How do I get rid of it?"

"Tell it. Go on. It can't enter your mind without your permission!"

"The humans don't deserve to die! I won't kill them!"

*They do, kill them, put them out of their misery.*

*Put you out of your misery.*

"I'd be as bad as them if I killed them."

*They'll take away everything you love. Strip it bare and melt it down to decorate their arms and legs and fingers. I promise that.*

"They can't take that away from me."

*If.*

*No.*

*When they take it away, you know where I am. Hear me. I'll tell you how to make corpses out of each one.*

The voice fades away.

Alice sits up slowly and begins to put her armour back on, her stab wound presumably regenerating already.

She sits, hunched over, silent.

"You okay, Alice?"

"I'm fine. Give me a minute."

"Would you say I was a leader this time? You know, instead of a follower?"

“Well.” She inhales sharply. “You certainly didn’t listen to my instructions to kill Beth.”

I smile and stare at her with wide eyes. “Do you think my arm will ever grow back?”

With her helmet still off, she winks at me. “If you’re anything like me.”



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LILLY

### Chapter 49: The New Capital

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Kabel drags me away from my brother and Dad.

“Tying up loose ends is always so satisfying.” She cleans Khalid’s blood from her knife.

We take the elevator to the top of the G.R.A.Z.I.A. building. Each floor covered in bodies.

Human bodies that do not move. Like the ones at West Cape. Like Khalid. Like Verne. Like Dad...all of the people I love.

Some still breathe. Until her guards slice their throats open. She takes me to the floor at the top of the building. The floor they say touches the sun. I wish I could touch the sun and let it take me away from this place.

“Where is she? Where is that miserable woman and her bloody miracle baby? How did that moron escape from here?”

One of the Kabel army members checks a teleporter pad. “It’s still warm but the coordinates are jumbled.”

“Get the hackers. I must find her. She’s the only one who can give me my own child. My own legacy.” Lord Kabel snaps her neck to me and clicks her heels over to where I stand frozen. “For now, my dear, you’ll be my child. Until we find President Beth and then... well.” She laughs. “There’s so many beautiful buildings here, princess. Look, we could display your father’s head on that one, oh and your brother’s would look so strong up there. Where would you like your head, princess?”

Lord Kabel turns to a group of soldiers gathered in the doorway. “Break the G.R.A.Z.I.A. sign off this building. Then erase the logo from everything. Everywhere. Gather the remaining civilians

and let me speak to them.” She looks back to me. “Would you like to speak to them? You’re their princess, after all. The last of G.R.A.Z.I.A.’s property.”

Lord Kabel’s feet are bent and twisted into her shoes.

“You can tell them how you killed everyone in the West to let your Lord in. How you poisoned them so I could be Lord of your Capital.”

She leans in closer to me. Her breath like icy winds. “You can tell them how your wrong answers killed your entire family. Huh?”

I nod.

“Tell them your ties to your disgusting, lying, betraying father and brother are severed, and you are their princess. Be the pretty face of the Kabel army. Earn the people’s trust so you can betray them once more. Go on. Wear the crown.” She signals to one of her personal guards. He unzips his spotted bag and pulls out another crown. The same as the one from before. She places it on my head. A knot in my hair wraps around it.

“Come on, princess. Let’s go talk to them.” She holds out her hand.

I take it.

We go to the plaza together. There are all the people who can still move. The people who live in the Floating City. Who knew my dad. Lord Kabel nudges me forward.

“Go on, child. Be a good girl.” She passes me a capsule and takes one herself. I consider not taking it, but her stone eyes lock onto me. “Tell them about your betraying father, tell them who you are, and inform them who their leader is.”

I wet my dry throat. Try to remember how to speak. “The Vice-President was my dad, but he was a liar. He betrayed you. I am not part of G.R.A.Z.I.A., I am with Lord Kabel. You should be too,” I say. Loud.

“Speak with a little enthusiasm next time,” she whispers to me. “Stand, should you wish to join me,” she says to the crowd.

Some stand. Many do not.

The Kabel army gathers those who remain sitting into another room, an old G.R.A.Z.I.A. building. She shoves me into the centre of them. “She may be a child, but she does not accept betrayal,” says Lord Kabel.

I take off the crown and hold it in my shaking hands. I throw it to the ground and crush it under my foot. The poison gas escapes.

“Now you will all lie here and die as betrayers,” says Kabel.

Her guards lock the civilians in the building.

Lord Kabel bends down and runs her cold hands along my hot cheek.

“And now you really *are* the princess who brings the fires of hell with her everywhere she goes,” she says and grins. “Now you say, yes, Lord Kabel, I am.”

“Yes, Lord Kabel. I am.”

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**BETH**

**Chapter 50: Subject Twenty**

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Concrete tunnels surround us, filled with plastic bullet-trams and shoddy electrics. Cheap imitation subways built at the height of existential dread. Intended to provide a less identity-shattering transport alternative to teleportation. The technicality of repetitive rebirth was quickly overridden by the convenience and speed of teleporters.

My greatest experiments, Sixteen and Nineteen, abandoned in exchange for my baby's life. They're nothing without me.

The 'staff only' room welcomes us. Desks made of fortified Styrofoam, carpeted with lab-grown wool. Staticky projection scenes to alleviate the windowless claustrophobia. A woman floats in one of the many knock-off gravity chairs.

"What're you doing here?"

"This is Roth's safehouse." I point to my stomach. "And this is Roth's baby. Who're you?"

"I'm his doctor." She buttons her white coat and smooths down the popped collar. "In case he needs medical assistance during an escape." She tugs at her hair. "Is he—" she gulps.

"I wouldn't be here if he was." The rings in her irises, creases around her lips, and tremble in her voice is all too familiar. "How long have you been down here?"

"Five years." She yanks on a loose thread.

Kubro clicks his tongue. "Whose kids did you diddle to land yourself here?"

Her neck crumples. "I would never—"

"You did do something, though." I slither closer. "Don't lie to me."

She blinks in erratic bursts, shifting her gaze between me and Kubro. "I sold videos of cheating spouses."

"I knew she was a pervert." Kubro smirks.

"Is that all?" I say.

"I targeted powerful people."

"You don't want to spit it out because you found Roth cheating on me." I snort. For once, Kubro and I share long, sustained eye contact and burst into laughter in sync. A pang from my lower abdomen hits me in a wave. "You don't know, do you? Poor pathetic girl."

"What?"

Kubro and I wipe tears of laughter from our cheeks. I encroach on the woman until she's backed against a wall and my lips are pressed against her ear. "Roth's dead," I whisper. "I killed him."

"...I'm free?"

"Sure sweetie." Kubro elbows me. "I'd love to see the perve go from Roth's slave to Kabel's."

A new pain rips through me. One the nanomachines can't quell. Nothing I've researched prepared me for this. My insides tear themselves apart, cramming a head through a spot too small to fit. I claw the woman's wrist, leaving pink marks. Some muscles expand while others contract. Everything convulses as I melt to the floor.

"Quick," I yap at the woman. "I'm having the baby!"

The ground beneath me is a pool of sweat. I scream until my throat dries and falls to pieces.

Kubro launches a towel at me. "When I said chaos, I didn't mean this kind." He slides out of the room and back into the tunnel.

The doctor, who's never seen a birth before, watches a birthing video with a hope in her eyes that it'll be a standard delivery. A surge of suction, no weaker than a toilet on a jet plane, grabs hold of my groin. She pulls my baby out and wraps it in her coat, the stains of my blood smear it red. My insides tangle and fold out the hole. Time flows over me in waves, short and extended all at once. My mind abandons my body, leaving it to rot on the floor. It creeps along the ceiling, a light-footed spider free to watch and climb and spin silver webs. Where are you, my baby? I pump my fangs.

"Cry," she whispers with downturned eyes. "It says you have to cry." She taps my baby's chest with her index fingers. "Breathe, little boy... breathe." Her eyes don't meet mine. She leaves me, half-naked and gasping for air. My temperature sinking as my blood floods the room.

Speak to me, where's your voice? I crack my segmented legs in frenzied impatience. Say something, anything, tell me how we're going to rule the world together. My long abdomen jerks and fills with poison. You can't leave me.

Erratic, the doctor returns with a device she's stitched together and shoves it in his nose and mouth. Slaps his pink cheeks and rubs his chest bones like a fogged mirror. "Cry, oh please, just cry!"

I shudder and try to get up, but my stomach muscles are heavy and shredded like mince. "My baby won't cry," I whisper.

She stops breathing into his mouth and compressing his chest. "I'm sorry but—"

"Give him here!"

"The cord isn't cut and he's—"

"NOW! We don't have much time!"

She places him in my hands. I pinch his face, force open his delicate eyelids, and angle him toward me.

“Look in my eyes. You’re not going to be like him. Look at me, look at what I am, be like me. Be like me, like me.” I beg as I cradle and rock him roughly. “Breathe like your mother, see like your mother, survive like your mother.” Silence. “Live, like your mother.”

Blinking. Chest movements. Inhale. A wet cough. He mimics my skin colour. The little patches of hair on his head copy mine. His eyes flick from blue to brown. His genitals become female.

The doctor stands back, her mouth hanging agape. “What the hell is that thing!” She points in horror. The look of pitied despair wiped from her face.

“She’s MY baby.” I whistle softly, rocking her gently in my arms.

“What have you done?” The woman backs away and leans against the glass divider, her pounding heart almost visible through her ribcage.

“Cut the cord already.”

Her hands tremble as she brings scissors to the cord. I snatch them and cut it myself.

“Find a surgical bot to heal my wounds.”

She trips and knocks off some utensils. Props the robot between my thighs and sets it to work.

“Get out.”

I look into my baby’s brown eyes. “You’re the strongest one, Subject Twenty. You’ll be just like me.”

**The End**